

AOLA VANDERGRIFF

# SILK AND SHADOW



Beautiful, innocent—  
she answered a call to  
passion under the hot  
Louisiana sun.



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Gillert

## The beds of moss were spread and waiting . . .

Finally, Andre rose. Instead of going to his bed, he took Arielle's hand, lifting her to her feet. His features, gilded by the moonlight, were drawn, stern, his dark eyes shadowed.

"Arielle."

It was the first time he'd said her name. A warm wave of feeling swept over her, and she caught her breath, swaying toward him. Then his mouth was on hers in a hot sweet flowering. With a groan, he held her close, feeling her urgency as she pressed against him.

Shivering from his efforts to control his passions, Andre led her to her bed of moss. . .

"Andre?" It was a question, and an invitation.

With a harsh sound in his throat, Andre Villere went to his knees beside her. His heart was thundering, shaking him. Her heartbeat, beneath his exploring fingers, was racing out of control.

I've got to stop, he thought wildly. I didn't mean for this to happen—

Then his mouth sought hers. Her lips parted, answering, and he was lost. . .

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VANDERGRIFF

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AND  
SHADOW



WARNER BOOKS

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# PROLOGUE

The sailing ship, the *Rachel*, listed three passengers and a cargo of whale oil bound for New Orleans. She had made a successful journey thus far.

Her master, fearing British attack, had hugged the coastline all the way. Running the British blockade was a risky business, especially with passengers aboard. He had successfully maneuvered the vessel along the rocky northern shore and through the sandy shoals of the blue, more southernly waters.

Now, almost within sight of his destination, safely cuddled inside the great thrusting paw that was Florida, the wind died. Sails sagged, dripping with humidity. The ship wallowed on a fog-shrouded sea like a fat duck in a nest of feathers. And finally, tatters of mist rose and blended into a solid wall of white.

The squat *Rachel*, privately owned, was a slack-

ly disciplined ship. There was no reason to stand watch on a fog-blind night in the haven of the Gulf. After rigging a sea-anchor, setting lanterns fore and aft, the crew drifted below to hammocks and games of chance.

No one took into account a curious displacement that occurred in the atmosphere around them; the air rushing in to create a current; a breeze that might fill the topgallants of a taller ship and set it moving again.

Only the passengers remained on deck. A charming trio, they were listed on the ship's roster as Madam Deidre Lanier and her two young daughters, Mindy and Arielle.

The roster made no mention of the fact that much-married Deidre, former New York actress, was a new bride. Nor that she was bound for New Orleans to join her new husband, Henri Lanier, who was due for several surprises.

The first was that he was not expecting her arrival.

Their courtship had been sudden and romantic; a glamorous stage personality and an amorous French gentleman come to New York for the purpose of selling a fortune in gems. Their marriage, following a stage door meeting, had consisted of two passion-filled nights in a New York hotel. They parted when Henri was forced to return to New Orleans and Deidre insisted upon remaining for the duration of her current play.

Now Madam Lanier, born Maggie Coombs, then wedding and shedding Whitcomb, Struthers, Frazier, and Rice, in that order, was out of work. Her walk-on part had been eliminated from the script. She had decided to go to Henri, making a dramatic entrance into her new husband's life.

Her second surprise for him would be even more dramatic. She would be presenting him with a ready-made family, the two daughters she'd somehow neglected to mention. She'd dressed them youthfully, planning to present them as six years of age and twelve going on thirteen.

She looked at sixteen-year-old Arielle with a furrow of worry between her brows. The childish pinafore the girl wore was limp with dampness, disclosing the rounded curves it was meant to conceal. Then her gaze moved on to small Mindy, looking fondly at the features that resembled her own. Lucky that Mindy had waited until she was eight to lose her baby teeth. That gap-toothed smile was a nice touch. She could easily be taken for six.

Arielle, pulling at the uncomfortable frock, could almost read her mother's thoughts. And her plan wasn't going to work. The ship's crew had been eyeing her with speculation. They weren't fooled. And while Mindy's appearance was in her favor, she didn't talk like a child. She was far too wise for her years as it was.

Arielle detested the charade. But if it made Mama happy, she would try.

She smiled at her mother, thinking how kind the fog was to her. The perfect features were blurred a little, no sign of the wrinkles the older woman feared. Her blonde hair, touched up a little, was a halo in the mist. Arielle's heart surged with pride. Mama was more like a beautiful, talented sister than a parent. A sister to be watched over and cared for. Like Mindy.

With a cry Arielle ceased her musings and caught at the skirt of Mindy's frock. The minx had climbed to the rail and was bending over in an attempt to see the water below.

"I think we moved a little," the child protested. "The ship feels different."

"Don't you do that again! I don't care if we're moving or not. Hold to the railing!"

Arielle turned to her mother for support. As usual Mama had seen nothing. Deidre stood, arms hugged to herself, her lips curved in a smile of anticipation. "It's going to be wonderful. Just think, girls, a new Papa. I know you're going to love him."

Mindy rolled her eyes as if to say, "We've been through this before." Arielle resisted the temptation to shake her. There had been good times and lean ones. Mama'd been unlucky with men, that was all. Now she deserved a little happiness. Maybe this marriage would work out. She hoped so.

There did seem to be a breeze. The mist was beginning to swirl. "Mama?" Arielle asked, "Don't you think we should go in? The damp—"

Her mother wasn't listening. "Look," Deidre said and laughed, thrusting her hands into the fog-laden atmosphere, watching them disappear, "white gloves. And," she looked down at her gown frothed with mist, "ermine!"

She twirled gracefully, an actress holding center stage. And she did not see what the girls saw and was not braced for it.

First there was a wave; a giant swell that lifted the *Rachel*, sending her listing to the side. Behind the wave a shadow loomed. A great hulk parted the curtain of fog. Then there was a tremendous jolt, a grinding and rending of wood as the two ships met, drowning the screams of two girls clinging tightly to the railing, eyes wide with horror as they watched their mother swept into the sea.

# BOOK I

## VILLERÉ-IN-THE-SWAMP

## Chapter 1

The city of New Orleans seemed to glitter in the bright blue morning. Hucksters called out their wares in a number of tongues. French, Spanish, and occasionally a Cajun voice.

"She t'am fresh, I gah-ron-tee."

Flowers bloomed and the air was heady with scent. Pretty Creole women flipped dust-clothes from ironwork balconies or dumped washbasins on unwary male heads, bringing laughter, flirtations, and sometimes assignations.

Despite the odorous, refuse-clogged gutters, the city seemed shining and clean. It was a day made for romance and happiness. French and Spanish gentlemen about their business strutted like peacocks. Even the soberly dressed Americans, so recently in control of New Orleans, wore smiling faces.

One of the exceptions was young Arielle Lanier, being towed along Royal Street by Cora, her stepfather's elegant mulatto mistress.

It had been two weeks since Arielle and her sister Mindy were deposited like unwanted kittens on the Lanier doorstep. Prior to their coming, the Frenchman had already regretted his hasty marriage in New York, and hoped Deidre had come to a similar conclusion. Perhaps if he simply ignored the situation it would go away.

Instead he was presented with the fact of his wife's death along with a pair of stepdaughters he hadn't known existed. Henri Lanier was not a family man. He had no wish to be a father, especially to a small, dirty-faced child with tear-swollen eyes and an angry older sister demanding that he avenge her mother's death.

According to the girl's story, the *Rachel* was rammed by a ship belonging to the pirate Laffite. Laffite's vessel was pursuing a Spanish ship and in the fog had mistaken the *Rachel* for its prey. Several crew members had been killed, and one of the pirates had dared to lay his hands on Arielle before the error was discovered.

Laffite's captain had apologized and paid the captain of the *Rachel* for the inconvenience—and his silence.

Arielle did not intend to let the matter drop. She demanded to be taken to someone in authority so that she might lodge charges against the renegades.

Henri Lanier was at a loss. He did business with Laffite. The very gems he sold in New York, at a handsome commission, were booty from a Spanish vessel. Mopping his brow, he tried to explain to the grief-stricken girl. The error was tragic but under-



standable. Laffite was operating legally, holding a charter out of Cartagena. And after all, by paying for damages, the privateers had shown they were acting in good faith—

His placating remarks did nothing to mollify the furious Arielle. She was bent on revenge. Therefore, he'd felt it necessary to keep both girls in close confinement until today. Until Arielle had made him a promise.

Thinking of that promise made Arielle's steps slow. It had been a betrayal of her mother.

"Don't lag!" Cora gave her a firm jerk that almost threw her off-balance. Arielle shook her hair back and glared at the woman before she obediently complied. Cora hated her, and the girl knew why. But it was the woman's own fault. It was she who had brought it to Lanier's attention that Arielle was older than she pretended to be.

From that moment on he had followed her around like a puppy, leering at her whenever he thought she was not looking. Then, yesterday afternoon, thinking Cora was gone from the house, he had cornered her, tearing at her bodice, covering her face and bosom with wet kisses. She'd used a knee-trick Mama had taught her for discouraging too-familiar actions, and she'd gotten away. But it had been horrible.

Last night Cora and Lanier had quarreled. That rascal, Mindy, listened at their door and brought the news to Arielle.

"Cora saw you two hugging," she told her sister, eyes bright with curiosity. "Arie, you *didn't!*"

Arielle's face flamed at the thought of the scene having been witnessed. Somehow that made it even worse for her to endure.

At Arielle's gesture of revulsion, Mindy looked

disappointed. Then she went on with her findings. Cora was threatening to leave. Henri Lanier had mollified her with a decision to find a husband for Arielle as quickly as possible. As soon as the girl came to her senses and promised not to go to the authorities about the *Rachel* incident, Cora was to take her out for some suitable gowns.

So, they were going to marry her off! The very thought made Arielle burn with anger. And yet, she supposed it really was the best alternative. At least it would get her away from this dreadful place.

This morning, standing before a guilty-looking Lanier, Arielle had promised silence. She would not go to the authorities with her story about the *Rachel*. She also agreed to comply with Monsieur Lanier's choice of a husband. Cora remained in the room, making a pretense of dusting. Arielle hoped she was happier, now that she had her way.

Arielle was not. She could only think of how Mama would have loved this bright day with its flowers and chattering birds; the colorful throngs of smiling people; country folk in ragged homespun; golden women twirling parasols; black women bearing burdens atop proud, gaily kerchiefed heads.

Poor Mama, with her fantastic hopes and dreams. She'd made such a small ripple in the theatrical world. Here, she'd had no opportunity to make a ripple at all.

Arielle's promise to forget the *Rachel* incident weighed on her heavily. But nothing could help her mother now. She must concentrate on finding a husband who would provide a home for herself and for Mindy. Some place away from Cora's animosity and Henri Lanier's lecherous mind.

Cora stopped to exchange greetings with a friend, a woman much like herself. The two of them

engaged in chit-chat, their sunshades protecting them from a mounting heat that turned Arielle dizzy. She waited, trying to block out their conversation with thoughts of the New England farm where she'd spent her first seven years with a spinster aunt. Then there had been the move to the theatrical boardinghouse when Mindy was born of Mama's third marriage. She'd been in the position of daughter plus nursemaid, but it was exciting.

Old Mimi Latour had instructed her in French and ballet. Pepe Pena had taught her to play the Spanish guitar. It was a house of old people. Mama said she stayed there because they accepted her children, but Arielle knew better. Mama was their golden girl, the rising star each had been or wanted to be. They were *family*. Arielle's mouth quirked as she thought of Thaddeus D. Lindenwood, the aging Shakespearean actor. He'd seen them off at the dock, striding around in his flapping cape, saying, "Parting is such sweet sorrow," in his booming voice. And it had been to cover his tears—

Her musings stopped as she realized the direction of the conversation between Cora and her friend. Not knowing she knew a smattering of French, they had switched to that language. And they were discussing her.

"Then it is M'sieu Lanier's notion to find her a husband? Or your own?" Cora's friend's voice dripped with acid sweetness. "I would not like such a girl to be in the house with my man. See how blue her eyes are, and how her dark hair shines in the sun. Her body curves seductively. She is ripe for love—"

"You might have reason to be concerned in such a situation," Cora's voice was cold, "I do not. There is an art to pleasing a man. Henri is a man of

the world, a connoisseur. He would not look at a silly young goose such as this one."

Arielle's face burned with anger. She bit her lip. She had no doubt of pleasing a man. Mama had taught her well, often returning from the theater to perch at the foot of the girls' bed and give them the benefit of her knowledge.

"Never marry a poor man. It is as easy to love a rich one. With a dominating, masculine man, play the helpless female. With a shy man, be aggressive, but let him think it is because he is so fascinating that you cannot help yourself."

Attracting men had been a game to Mama. But her little tricks had worked. I could take Henri Lanier away from Cora just like that, Arielle thought, her lips tight. Perhaps I should! Then she remembered the pouched eyes that devoured her, the soft clammy hands, and wet lips and shuddered.

No, she thought. It would be better to take her chances elsewhere. Maybe the husband Henri Lanier found for her would be equally repellent, but she would regard it as a trade. She would be a good wife in return for a home for Mindy.

The conversation seemed to be ending. "Where are you going for her gowns?" Cora's friend asked.

Cora shrugged. "Henri has an account at the place on Royal Street. You know the one I mean—where else can one find something ready-made? I anticipate some difficulty, for reasons I cannot explain now. But I must do as Henri instructed me."

She turned to Arielle, her relentless fingers closing over the girl's arm.

"Don't dawdle. We're almost there." Cora nodded to her friend in a regal gesture of farewell and hurried down the banquette. A turn of a corner, a

few steps, and Arielle was swung toward the entrance of a small shop.

A small discreet sign proclaimed the proprietors to be the brothers Laffite.

## Chapter 2

Arielle's eyes widened as she read the name on the shop front. She stopped short, forcing Cora to a halt, the gist of the woman's earlier conversation now making sense.

"What is this place?"

"Exactly what it says, a shop!" Cora snapped. "This is where we will purchase your clothing."

"Laffite? The man who killed my mother?"

"You promised to forget that nonsense," the woman reminded her. "You will have a choice of rich gowns, all ready to wear—"

Ready to wear? Yes! Torn, no doubt, from some lady aboard a Spanish vessel, attacked as the *Rachel* was attacked! Arielle set her chin. "I will not go in there!"

"You will go!" There was steel in Cora's voice. "You promised—"

"I promised not to go to the authorities, and that's all. I won't wear anything that comes from here! I won't!" Her voice rose as she tried to release her wrist from Cora's grip. "I won't! I'd rather go naked!"

Her words caught the ears of a passing gentleman. He stopped and stared, looking amused. A red tint of humiliation coloring her tawny cheekbones, Cora tugged at Arielle. The girl set her heels and didn't budge. A woman joined the gentleman watcher and tittered at the scene being enacted on the street. The mulatto's face wore a mask of anger that lightened as she caught sight of an acquaintance.

"Ho, Gambi," she called, "Give me a hand—"

A rough-looking man, a gold earring in one ear, swaggered from the store's shadowed entrance. "Glad to oblige, Cora," he said cheerfully.

Arielle shrank before him, recognizing him as one of the disreputable crew who had boarded the *Rachel*. One moment after her mother's death, he had dragged herself and Mindy into the cabin. "You're next, sweetheart," he'd told the sobbing Mindy. "So don't bawl. I like 'em young, too—"

Then Arielle had felt his hands tearing at her clothing, his rough beard scratching her tender flesh as she fought. Only the intervention of a small, scarred, noseless man had saved her. He had pulled the man away, saying there was a mistake—

He caught at her free arm now, and the horrifying memories of that day aboard the *Rachel* returned full force. "Take your hands off me," she screamed. "Pirate! Thief! Murderer!"

"For God's sake, stop that!" Cora hissed. She tried to put her hand over Arielle's mouth as the man called Gambi dragged the girl toward the door



of the shop. But Arielle twisted her head away, catching at the door-facing. "Help me," she called to the gathering cluster of onlookers. "Help me, please, help me!"

"Release that girl!"

Cora's grip fell away at the authoritative voice. Gambi did not relinquish his hold, but truculantly turned to face the speaker. His hand went to a knife at his belt.

Arielle looked at her champion with fear-dazed eyes. A tall young man, dark hair tumbling over his forehead, he was exquisitely clothed in a tawny velvet coat over fawn breeches. His walking stick had miraculously transformed itself into a rapier.

"Gambi, isn't it? Have you taken to abducting children?"

"She is no child," Cora said, intervening. "She is a young lady. I asked for his assistance."

The young man's eyes flickered over Arielle in surprise. "Then he is abducting a young lady, since she is clearly being forced against her will." He scowled at the man. "Laffite is having a difficult time defending his good name to Governor Claiborne. I do not believe he will thank you for creating a scene before his establishment. I suggest you release the lady and go on about your business."

For a moment there was no sound. Then Gambi, though his bloodshot eyes were murderous, spread his hands in defeat. He disappeared into Laffite's shop. Arielle's rescuer turned his attention to the mulatto.

"You are Cora, I believe. Housekeeper to—?" He left it on a question, and Cora answered sullenly.

"To Monsieur Lanier. And I am but carrying out his instructions. This is his stepdaughter. I have

been sent to find proper clothing for her, and she refuses to cooperate."

The man bowed to Arielle. "I am Ramon Marquez," he introduced himself. "With your permission, I will see you home. I'm sure your stepfather will not take kindly to the fact of your being bullied by a servant in his house—aided by a man of dubious reputation."

Cora glared at him for a space, then with a toss of her proud head, walked away.

Ramon Marquez crooked his arm in invitation. Arielle, conscious of watching, curious eyes, placed a timorous hand on his sleeve. The rapier, newly sheathed, became a walking stick once more. He gestured with it. The crowd hastily dispersed, and he led Arielle away.

They walked in silence, Marquez mentally cursing himself. He'd made a deadly enemy in the man, Gambi, and for what? It was evidently a family quarrel, Lanier's housekeeper doing as she'd been told to do. But Gambi's interference had tipped the balance and his own chivalrous nature had forced him to take action. He supposed he would do the same in any such circumstance.

Courage, he thought with a twisted smile, was a strange thing. Here he was, fearless in a tense situation. Yet he did not have the backbone to control his own life.

He looked down at Arielle. Though she had the appearance of an urchin, with her smudged face and rumpled pinafore, she walked with head high. It was plain, however, that the girl was close to the edge of her nerves.

On impulse, he led her into one of the park areas that studded New Orleans with a profusion of

flowers and shrubs. At night the spot would be a trysting place for lovers. Under the brilliant sky it was empty and secluded. He found a bench of white iron lace beneath a tree filled with blossoms and seated the girl.

The poise she exhibited on the street now failed her. Tears spilled from her eyes. Taking a fine linen handkerchief from his sleeve, he gave it to her. Arielle, embarrassed, scrubbed at her face. She had not wept since the death of her mother, sustained at first by anger, then by the need to survive in an alien and unfriendly house. She handed the handkerchief back with a watery smile that Ramon answered with one of his own.

"You missed a place," he teased. He reached out to blot a tear that glistened on her cheek, marveling at the color of her eyes. They were the same heavenly blue as the clematis that twined along the wall behind her.

"There." He drew back. "Now, would you like to explain the scene in which we were just involved? I wasn't aware Lanier had a family. I intend to speak to him and tell him of my actions on your behalf. It would help to know how such an—unpleasant situation arose."

When she didn't speak, he said crossly, "Come! I have interfered in a family affair. I must know if I had just cause."

"I could not go into the shop. I—I have no liking for the pirate, Laffite."

"Nor do I." He sounded amused now. "Though I cannot recall indulging in a public tantrum due to my feelings in regard to the gentleman."

He was sorry the minute the words left his lips. The girl's face suffused with color, and she looked

down at her hands. She sat silent for a long time before lifting her gaze to his.

"There are reasons. I cannot tell you. I made a solemn vow this morning that I would not go to the authorities."

His laughter was harsh, self-mocking. "Good God! I doubt there's anyone with less authority than I! Therefore you break no promise. If it will help to talk to someone, please speak freely."

Arielle looked at her rescuer, seeing the sincerity in his face, then dropped her gaze to her clasped hands once more. In a dull monotone, she began. "We left New York on the ship, *Rachel*. My mother, my little sister, and I—"

When she had finished, his face was somber. "Laffite is entrenched in this city. Many people do business with him. The American governor, Claiborne, is attempting to brand him the criminal he is. But it will take time. In the end your mother's death will be avenged. I swear it."

Arielle's tears glistened again, and Ramon walked away, pretending to inspect a particularly perfect blossom. Merciful God, he thought, What have I gotten myself into? The girl's plight touched him. An orphan, unwanted by her stepfather, she would be married off to the first candidate who would provide a home for her and her sister.

Probably someone like that old roué, Desplaines, who was senile and syphilitic—always proclaiming he was looking for a young wife to warm the bed of his old age.

Or Lanier might strike a profitable bargain with one of Laffite's crew. The thought of a tender young girl in the grip of one of those ruffians made his blood run cold.

There had to be an alternative. Yet, how could he, Ramon Marquez, guide someone else's life when he was so uncertain in his own? There was even an element of similarity in their positions. Sooner or later, he himself would give in to his mother's importunings.

The thought struck like a hammer blow. He'd been blind! There just might be a way out for both of them. The only snag would lie in dealing with Henri Lanier. They shared a mutual feeling of dislike.

He considered what he knew of the man. Lanier did business with Laffite. He was also an inveterate gambler. Several of Ramon's acquaintances held Lanier's signatures of intent to pay. They might be bought up, used as a wedge—

For a moment, his resolve was shaken. Then, straightening his shoulders, he turned to Arielle. "Come, I will see you home."

Arielle went on reluctant feet. Only the fact that Mindy was there kept her from running away. She feared facing Cora, and the displeasure of Lanier when he learned his orders had been disobeyed.

She needn't have worried. Cora had regained her arrogant air, only her amber eyes showing a hint of anger. Henri Lanier was not in. He was not expected until evening.

Ramon Marquez left, promising to return later. When he had gone, Cora launched into a rectal of the trouble small Mindy had caused. She'd gathered an armful of the gardener's prized flowers. She'd managed to get bee-stung, making a frightful scene that drove the servants from their duties. The child was banished to her room.

Arielle hurried upstairs to find her sister muti-

nous and tear-stained. She hugged her close and related her adventures of the afternoon, recklessly dramatizing her experiences as Mindy's face brightened. Cora's attempts to force her into Laffite's store, the entry of the fearsome Gambi, and then a gallant rescuer—

Mindy was enthralled. She forgot her bee-swollen cheek. It was romantic, like one of Mama's plays. Perhaps the hero had fallen in love with Arielle. He might ride up on a big white horse and carry them away.

She studied Arielle critically, coming out of her daydream with a thud. Arie had everything to work with, but she'd bet she didn't use it to her advantage. Mama would have stuck her bosom out and looked up at the man from under her lashes. But not Arie—

"You look a mess," she said, dolefully. "I would have found some way to get a beautiful gown first. Then I'd have let him rescue me."

Arielle's laughter was hollow. The handsome Ramon Marquez had been interested only in her plight, treating her as a little sister or a friend. Would it have been different if she'd been dressed properly? Would he have seen her as a woman?

She moved to a mirror and stood there for a long while, thinking of the words of Cora's friend. *Blue eyes, shining hair, ripe for love.* She thought of those last words, and her rescuer's gentle touch on her arm. It made her shiver in a new and not unpleasant way. Ripe for love? Perhaps she was.

She must not think such thoughts. Most probably she wouldn't see Ramon Marquez again. She must brace herself to marry some man of Henri Lanier's choosing. At least she still had Mindy.

Whirling, she snatched Mindy up in a fierce em-

brace that set both of them laughing. But the cheek Arielle pressed against her sister's golden curls was damp with tears.

The man who occupied Arielle's thoughts had returned to the park where they talked. He sat on the iron-lace bench, chin resting on hands interlaced across the top of his walking stick. His eyes were filled with an infinite sadness that blinded him to the beauty around him as he pondered his decision.

At last he rose, having come to terms with the thing he must do. Now he would arrange a few details in order to bring the needed pressure on Henri Lanier. He knew his own weakness. If the thing were to be done at all, it must be done quickly.

Rising, he plucked a golden flower, then crushed it in his hand, his face haunted with remembering. "Cleone," he said in a whisper that was like a cry of pain. "Cleone—ah, God! My poor Cleone."



## Chapter 3

Her name is Arielle, Ramon Marquez thought, as he led his new wife and her young sister from the Lanier home. I must remember that.

In his talks with Henri Lanier, she had been referred to as "the girl." Their discussions had been heated, and Ramon had been forced to bring pressure to bear in order to obtain the man's consent.

The girl was a different matter. He didn't realize she hadn't been consulted in the matter until she appeared at Cora's call, face white with shock at the sight of himself—and a waiting itinerant minister. She had trembled throughout the ceremony. Poor child—

Ramon lifted Mindy into the hired carriage, then turned to give Arielle a hand. Her face was filled with a kind of dawning wonder. The curved

body that brushed his so briefly was definitely not that of a child. He flinched away as though he'd been burned.

"I hope you are comfortable," he said, almost formally. "I am taking you to my home, Villeré-in-the-Swamp. It will be a long journey. I will ride on ahead."

Turning to avoid the questioning blue eyes, he directed the Negro driver to place the girls' few possessions in the boot, then mounted his restive horse. The small caravan moved out.

Arielle looked back. Henri Lanier had not spoken during the brief ceremony. He had not escorted them to the door to say farewell. One window glowed briefly in the gathering dusk, as if a curtain had been pulled aside. It would be Cora, making certain they had gone.

They would not return, if Arielle had anything to say about it.

Soon guitars would begin to strum beneath wrought-iron balconies. Lights would begin to glow in taverns and ballrooms, and the citizens of New Orleans would flutter toward them like bright moths. But now there was only the sound of clopping hooves, the creak of harness, the small thunder of wheels on cobblestones. Mindy was too quiet, and Arielle reached a hand to clasp that of her young sister.

"It wasn't much of a wedding, was it?" Mindy said in a disappointed tone.

Arielle had to agree. The minister was an ignorant, back-country man; shifting his chew between questions and responses. She'd been so dazed throughout the ceremony that she could only look back on it in retrospect, like a dream—

"You didn't have a wedding gown," Mindy said candidly. "I don't think it was legal."

"The gown isn't important, Mindy. Or the minister, either. It's what people feel in their hearts that counts—"

"Are you in love with him?"

The question rocked Arielle back. "I—I don't know," she admitted. "It's too soon. I—I think I could be. He's very handsome, and very kind—"

"He didn't kiss you. There's always kissing at weddings. And when the preacher said, 'Do you take this woman,' he looked sad. Why did he marry you, Arie?"

Arielle herself had been wondering. Mindy was too astute, too mature for her years. As Arielle attempted to fashion an answer, the child went on.

"Maybe he has a dead wife, and a lot of little orphan children that need a mother. Or, maybe—," her voice took on a quiver of delicious terror, "—maybe he's like Bluebeard, and he murders all his wives and stuffs them in the closet."

Arielle laughed, revising her former opinion. Mindy was not as mature as she'd thought. But she could not let her indulge in such imaginings. The night itself was conducive to them. They had moved out of the city and were traveling along a rutted trail that paralleled the natural banks of silt bordering the Mississippi. The wagon's lantern swayed with their progress, casting frightening shadows. The river smells, of fish and mud and rotting vegetation, added to the oppressiveness of the atmosphere.

Arielle drew Mindy into her arms, cradling the child's head against her shoulder. "Try to sleep, He said the journey would be long."

"I hope it doesn't take too long," Mindy yawned, "or you'll miss your wedding night."

That, thought Arielle, wouldn't be such a bad turn of events. From her virginal upbringing, under a maiden aunt's tutelage, she had been swept into a milieu in which love affairs were a major topic of conversation. She had kept her eyes and ears open and learned a great deal. Yet in the middle of the ceremony today, she'd thought of its consequences and begun to tremble.

Ramon Marquez, whose name she now bore, was a stranger. The thought of disrobing, of performing the act of love with a stranger, was terrifying. There had only been the one meeting—and then the vows. She tried without success to summon up his features in her mind. If only he'd ridden with them in the carriage. Given her a chance to get to know him before they arrived.

"—Or he could be like Harry Fosbie," Mindy said sleepily, snuggling closer. Arielle stiffened, then forced a laugh.

Harry Fosbie, indeed! At least forty-five, he still played juvenile roles. He was terrified of women, except for his mother, with whom he'd shared a two-room suite at the boardinghouse. It was rumored they did tatting in their room at night—

Arielle bit her lip, recalling the moment of contact when her husband had helped her into the carriage. She had felt him stiffen, jerk away. The thought of being married to an abnormal man was worse than that of sleeping with a stranger—

Then she relaxed, for his face was suddenly clear in her mind. Soft dark eyes, sensual mouth. It was the face of a passionate man. Why he had

married her and what was expected of her, she would soon learn. For now, it was enough to be rid of Lanier's roving hands and Cora's angry eyes. To know that she and Mindy were traveling toward a place that would be home.

Lulled by the sway of the carriage and Mindy's warm body, Arielle slept. When she opened her eyes at last, she was confused for a moment. The stars above her seemed to have changed positions. No longer were they traveling on solid ground. The carriage jounced along a roadway made of logs running through the swamp. From the black water on either side, mists were rising like spirits to mingle with the grotesqueries of cypress; touching the beards of Spanish moss with silver; dripping from the leaves of parasitical vines.

In the lantern light, it was a nightmarish scene. And from the depths of the swamp came a bellowing sound that made Arielle's blood run cold. She shifted the sleeping Mindy gently and leaned toward the silent driver.

"What was that?"

"Bull gatush."

Arielle sank back, holding Mindy protectively. She felt an irrational anger toward the man who'd ridden ahead, leaving them to the mercy of a hired driver in a terrifying, haunted-looking wilderness.

Ramon Marquez was struggling with his own demons. He'd preceded them, planning to announce his marriage to his mother and ensure a welcome for Arielle. He had promised her he would marry, he would say. So he had taken a wife of his own selection. She must make the best of it. Now, knowing she would see it for what it was—an act of defiance—he had lost his courage. He would wait for Arielle

to arrive. It was only right that they face his mother together.

His hands like ice, his face damp with perspiration and mist, he waited.

The carriage rolled out of the darkness, across a small arched bridge that spanned black bayou water. He stepped forward and helped the drowsy Mindy down, then aided Arielle, careful to avoid any more contact than necessary.

"Welcome," he said, a little hoarsely. "This is our home."

They were admitted to the shadowed house by a gray-polled black man who eyed the girls with an expression of shocked curiosity. Ramon volunteered no introduction. Arielle had time only to catch a glimpse of a lighted foyer. A small fireplace blazed on one wall, despite the humid weather. A glitter of candles echoed reflections from one gold-framed mirror to another.

The servant threw open double doors, revealing a room that overshadowed the elegance of the foyer. Here, too, a fire burned, glinting off colors of crimson, gold, and purple. Ramon led Mindy to a divan where she collapsed sleepily, and turned to the black man.

"Summon your mistress, Ned," he ordered, "and Miss Luisa, too." With a painful smile toward Arielle, he said, "This is going to be quite a surprise."

Surprise? To whom? The question was at the tip of her tongue, but Arielle stopped at Ramon's expression. His gentle brown eyes held an odd blankness; his mouth was trembling a little, his upper lip beaded with perspiration. The man who faced Gambi with such aplomb, Henri Lanier with cold determination, was terrified. Legs spread,

shoulders stiff, his eyes were fixed on a door in the far wall. He seemed braced for some unknown danger.

Instinctively, Arielle backed toward the couch to shield her sleeping sister.



## Chapter 4

After a silent, seemingly lengthy wait, the door opened to reveal a small, plump woman in a sweeping night-robe of black velvet. Even at this hour, her face was made up like a courtesan's, her silver hair lacquered high above enormous dark eyes like Ramon's. The small pudgy hands she lifted in a gesture of shock glittered with diamonds.

Behind her, a tall dark girl appeared. She, too, was regally clad. She would have been breathtakingly beautiful except for her expression of discontent.

The older woman's look of surprise had faded into one of doting affection as she shook a ringed finger at Ramon.

"How like you, you naughty boy, to appear at this unholy hour! But I don't understand." She ges-

tured inquiringly toward Arielle and Mindy. "Who are these children?"

Ramon swallowed and took Arielle's arm, his touch burning through her sleeve.

"Mamacita, Luisa—I wish to present my wife."

The only sound following his pronouncement came from the old Negro; a harsh, indrawing of breath that portrayed shock. Ramon's mother shot him an angry look, but regained her composure.

"Surely, you are jesting, son—"

"No, Mama."

"Then the thing is done? Within the Church?"

"Before a minister, Mama."

The older woman swayed for a moment, clutching at a chair back for support. "Forgive me. It is the surprise." Then she came toward Arielle, arms outstretched. "I am Madam Villeré, Ramon's mother." She placed a warm kiss on Arielle's cheek. "And this is Luisa, half-sister to Ramon."

Luisa acknowledged the introduction with a cold nod, then looked toward Mindy with a softening of her features. "Who is the little girl?"

"My sister Mindy," Arielle said, a bit defensively.

"She's exhausted, poor little thing!" Luisa bent above the sleeping child. "I will take her to my room for the night."

"How thoughtless of me," Madam Villeré exclaimed. "You must be weary, too, after your long journey. I will call my personal maid! Ned," she said, turning to the black man, "wake Blanche."

"Blanche?" Ramon's tone was sharp. "Where is Cleone?"

"We will discuss plantation affairs later," his mother said sweetly. "Now, the important thing is

that I have a new daughter. And such a lovely one. How old are you, my dear?"

Arielle managed to answer her rapid-fire questions until a huge black woman arrived to lead her to her room. Madam Villeré kissed her warmly, then put a delaying hand on Ramon's arm. "I shall entertain your husband while you prepare for bed," she pouted prettily. "For a few moments, I would speak to him as my son."

Arielle followed the Negress upstairs, her heart overflowing with the warmth of her welcome, trembling a little in anticipation of the hours to come.

The moment she was out of sight, Madam Villeré faced Ramon. "How could you do this without my permission?"

"I promised I'd marry in return for your agreement to not sell Cleone. And I've carried out my promise! Where is she?"

"We'll discuss Cleone when you've answered my questions. Who is this girl? Where did she come from? And why not Elena Herrera, or Maria Cortez?"

"Elena has a French sister-in-law who is her confidante. Maria has round heels and gossips. She'd have a lover within the year and much to tell him to keep him entertained."

His mother nodded, grudgingly. "But there is Elizabeth Allingham. Another link with the British—"

"Such a marriage would signal my intent. It is difficult enough maintaining the confidence of the Americans. Now, suppose we forget the girls I might have married and think of Arielle's assets."

"I'm waiting," the woman said grimly.

"First, she hates Laffite, blaming him for her mother's death. She will do anything to avenge her.

Second, she has a shy, innocent charm that may break through the military branch of the Villerés and gain us needed information."

He turned and walked to the fire, warming his icy hands. "Third, the girl is loyal to anyone she loves. She needs a mother's love. And, God help her, you're an expert in that area!"

Madam Villeré's features melted in a fond smile. "Dear boy! It's clear you've thought this out well. I should have known. It was the surprise—"

He turned to face her, his face hard with determination. "Now," he said, "tell me! Where is Cleone?"

A few seconds later, Ramon left through a back door and strode grimly toward the slaves' quarters. She'd only promised not to *sell* Cleone, his mother had insisted. Nothing had been said about keeping the girl in the house, pampering her. So she'd brought Blanche, the laundress, in as her personal maid. And Cleone. Ah, God, lovely fragile Cleone—who had grown up in the house as playmate to the Villeré children until she had become something more—was banished to the world of laundry tubs and lye soap.

The acrid stench of old wash water burned his nostrils as he rounded the corner of the small hut that had been Blanche's. Fighting the urge to fling open the door and enter, he tapped instead, in fear of frightening her. There was no answer. He knocked again—and finally pushed open the door.

The room was dark, except for the small bed of banked coals in the fireplace. But there was enough glow to gild the form of the girl who stood like a startled fawn poised for flight. Beneath the coarse short sleeping shift she wore, the outline of her pregnancy was apparent. Ramon's breath went from

him in a cry of love and anguish as he moved toward her.

"Cleone!"

She backed away.

He might have known it! Her grandfather had come straight to her with the news of his marriage. Damn Ned! He'd wanted to be the first to tell her, to explain—

"Cleone, I've got to talk to you—"

"Yo wife wants some washin' done, I gits raht on it, come mawnin'." The thick, Negroid accent came oddly from lips that made music of poetry. He felt like shaking her. He also wanted to grab her and kiss her into submission, as he'd done so many times before.

"I know you're upset, sweetheart, but you needn't be. You've got to let me talk to you. This is a marriage of expediency only. You know that if I could have married you—"

She tossed her long hair back, shutting her golden eyes, speaking in a mincing mimicry of a teen-age boy's breaking voice—obviously a quote.

*"You are my wife, Cleone—here, in this field under the sun, I'm telling you and I'm telling God—Now, you say it, Cleone—Say, I, Cleone, take thee, Ramon—"*

With a choked cry, Ramon turned from her uplifted face, leaning his forehead against the rough, splintered wall. The day was alive in his mind. It had begun as a prank. She'd stolen a handful of chinquapins he carried as lucky pieces and run with them. He had caught her, and the feel of her hot body as they wrestled for possession of her booty had triggered something in him.

It had ended with her tawny, violated body lying in the grass. They both had wept, then she had

reached her arms to him. *You are my wife, Cleone.* He had said those words.

"I meant what I said," he told her now. "Nothing has changed. I married because of a promise to my mother. Now we can have a life together—"

"White woman in yo' bedroom, nigger in the quarters. That what you honin' fo', white man?"

"Dammit," he gritted, "Will you stop that and listen? Mama's giving me your papers. I'm moving you into a little house in town. There'll be others like you! You'll have friends. I'll see you every night when I'm in New Orleans!"

"And your wife in between!" The golden eyes were slitted now. "I can live as a slave, but I'll kill myself before I'll become any white man's placée! Maybe I'll find myself some good honest black man! Let this child think that's his daddy! Better than having a daddy who's a coward, hiding behind his Mama's petticoats—"

"Cleone, that's enough!" Ramon strode toward her, putting a hand over her mouth to quiet her rising voice. She bit deeply, and he swore. Then the feel of her body against his own triggered the old familiar excitement. Like a madman, he tore at the flimsy shift, then carried her to the pallet stuffed with moss that served as her bed in a corner of the musty cabin.

She lay still as he took her in passionate frustration. At last, he fell aside with a groan, lying quiet for a long time, arm across his eyes to hide his tears. Then raising himself on an elbow, he traced the clean lines of her body with his hand, lingering over the tremor that marked the movement of his child.

"Cleone," he whispered, "you are my only love. I've told you all my hopes, my dreams—"

"And I'll use them against you now," she said in

a cold dead voice, "so you might as well kill me. It's your mother's idea to help the British take New Orleans so they'll let you set up a little Spanish kingdom with you as Mister God himself. *Get yourself a white wife, my son. You can have the nigger wench, as long as she stays in her place!* They're not your dreams but hers! It's a sick relationship. I listened because I loved you. But not now! Now I'm with the other side."

"You can't mean that, sweetheart," he pleaded. "You're overwrought. In the morning—" He reached for her, and she slid away, back to the wall, her eyes shining in the dark like a cornered animal.

"Touch me once more, white man, and I'll kill you! Go back to your milk-faced wife!"

A short time later, Ramon entered the main house and faced his mother. He held his bleeding hand behind him, but a scratched jawline and raging eyes he could not conceal. Madam Villeré tabulated the signs of his distress with satisfaction as he told her he was returning immediately to New Orleans.

"And what shall I tell your bride?"

"Tell her anything you choose," he grated.

"I will tell her that, as good Catholics, we do not recognize your hasty marriage. She must have religious instruction—and a trousseau. Invitations will be sent for a formal wedding, to be held one month from today."

Ramon shrugged, irritably, and started for the door. Her voice stopped him. "You will be here," she said with a ring of iron.

It was not a request but a command.

When he had gone, Madam Villeré stood smiling, her hand to her breast. The small, nagging pain

brought on by excitement was still there. But it was overshadowed and forgotten in the tremendous surge of new confidence and power. Everything, at last, was going well.

The boy's silly infatuation with the slave, Cleone, had frightened her for a while. She had devoted her life to her son, taking a second husband whom she had detested, bearing him a child. And it had all been to one end. Someday, somehow, the hated French would be driven from New Orleans, and a Marquez would take his rightful place, the government returned to Spain.

With the advent of the Americans, all had seemed lost. But she had clung stubbornly to her dream. And now all was working to her advantage. The United States was at war with England. And what better place to invade American territory than through the myriad waterways of southern Louisiana! Ramon had insinuated himself into the service of the American Governor Claiborne. Through contacts, he was passing information about the fortifications of New Orleans to the British. When the time came, he would lead them in. And he would be given an important post. Gradually, New Orleans would be returned to the benevolent rule of Spain.

She caught sight of herself in a mirror. Her eyes were glittering. She was breathing much too hard. With an effort, she brought herself under control. Emotion should play no part. She must be cold, calculated, in every move.

Now, about the girl—

Ramon had chosen well. Claiborne could hardly have suspicions of a man married to an American. She was young, certainly virginal, and had a potential loveliness, even in her bedraggled state. Surely



she would be able to bring Ramon to his senses. With a warm, young wife, he would not stray too often to Cleone's bed.

Not that it mattered. What had mattered was his insistence on treating Cleone as a wife, recognizing her child as his. She smiled with satisfaction. That part was over and done.

Now, the problem lay in just how much Arielle should know of Ramon's plans.

First, Madam Villeré decided, they must shower the girl with love and affection. It might be wise to let her think, as Claiborne did, that Laffite was plotting with the British. That Ramon's activities dealt with putting down such treasonous activities. God knew, it was hard enough to carry on with sulky, undependable Luisa in the house. She knew too much for her own good—

Now, Ramon had returned to New Orleans. Upstairs his bride would be waiting, and wondering. Pondering, Madam Villeré came to a decision. She would not go up to the girl. Let her wait—and worry. Then in the morning, after a night of sleeplessness and confusion, she would be ripe for a little motherly love and understanding.

It would be good to gain another ally.

## Chapter 5

Arielle, indeed, endured a night of sleeplessness and confusion. The Negress, Blanche, had escorted her to an exquisitely appointed suite. They entered a small sitting room, done in red and gold. It displayed an elegant marble fireplace. A fire burned there, despite the heat.

Blanche hunkered to replenish the blaze, and Arielle wiped her damp forehead. "It isn't necessary, is it?" she asked hesitantly. "It's quite warm—"

"Keeps off the damp," Blanche grunted. "The Missus don't want no mildew."

From the sitting room, they moved into a sleeping chamber dominated by an enormous four-poster bed swathed in mosquito-netting. Knowing it would be her marriage bed, Arielle nervously averted her gaze.

Here, too, Blanche built up the fire. Arielle

looked longingly at the heavily draped windows. "Perhaps we could open a window and let some fresh air in," she suggested.

The woman looked horrified. "The sickness, that's what you let in! No, Ma'am, the Missus won't stand for that. You leave them windows like they is."

Overly warm and helpless, Arielle followed the woman as she replenished the fire in a small, closet-like room where an ornate screen hid a copper hip bath, then on into a room with masculine appointments. She knew instinctively that it was—had been Ramon's. Now they would share the marriage bed.

Soon Blanche had accomplished her tasks. Bathed, clad in a nightdress that Blanche had viewed with contemptuous eyes, Arielle was alone. At any moment a stranger would be coming to this room, and she must try to please him. To avoid the trembling that ran through her at the thought, she tried to remember the things her mother had said, reciting them in her mind as a school child would, by rote.

*Men are excited when there is a single candle burning in the room.* Very well—Arielle lit one candle.

*A woman must appear as her most enchanting self, in a seductive gown.* Carrying the candle to a pier glass, Arielle studied her reflection. Her bed gown had been chosen by Mama with an eye to emphasizing her youth. High-necked, with long bell sleeves, it obscured the curves of Arielle's slender body. Only a pair of huge, dark-fringed blue eyes gave color to the pale ghost-image that looked back at her. Deliberately, she snuffed the candle. She had an idea it would lend no glamour to the occasion.

Still Ramon did not come. At last, she forced herself to climb into the high bed where she lay feeling small and lost. Here she thought of other things her mother had told her, ways to please a man. A red flush stained her cheekbones as she felt changes in her body, a warm flooding of desire that was not unpleasant.

And she waited.

Finally, her nerves ragged at the delay, she rose to pace the floor. What could a mother have to say to her son on his wedding night that would take this long? Madam Villeré, after her initial shock, had seemed warm and welcoming. Was it possible she refused to recognize her as Ramon's bride? If this were the case, surely someone would have the courtesy to tell her!

Dear heaven, it was suffocating! Arielle eyed the draped windows. If there was sickness out there, it had already touched her along the journey. And if Madam Villeré didn't want the windows open, that was just too bad! This was Arielle's room, at least for the night.

Crossing the room, she drew the drapes and struggled with a sticking window. It finally slid open, revealing a sea of fog. Arielle closed her eyes, recalling her mother thrusting her hands into the mist, saying, *White gloves*. Then, pointing to her fog-shrouded skirts, *Ermine*.

It had seemed beautiful then. Now it was a creeping horror. A wisp, like a blind worm, felt its way across the sill, and Arielle reached up to slam the window down. And then she heard the sound.

A fog-muffled sound of hooves on wood, a single rider crossing the arched bridge that spanned black bayou water, not approaching but going away.

Instinctively, she knew the horseman's identity. She felt a sense of mingled relief and humiliation at his rejection of her.

Why had he married her? Why had he brought her here, only to leave her without a touch or a word?

Arielle returned to bed to toss until almost dawn. She was trapped in a situation she didn't understand—and she was homesick. She missed the boardinghouse with all its friendly faces. She missed Mama. And though Mindy was here, somewhere under the same roof—she missed Mindy.

When Arielle woke, the drapes were parted and the sun was shining brightly into the room. She fought her way free of the netting and went to the window.

The Villeré plantation rose like a green glass bubble from the surrounding swamplands. Almost circular in shape, bordered by lush growth in the surrounding marshes, it was laid out in neat square patches. Behind the house and to the left were the slave quarters, a woman in a voluminous starched apron and bright tignon spreading washed sheets over flowering shrubs to dry. In the distance, slaves were working in what appeared to be a kitchen garden. And beyond were fields of cane.

Arielle breathed deeply of the sweet morning air. Then she saw the lurking figure of a woman hiding behind a bush. She stared. Luisa? But why was she behaving so furtively?

As she watched, puzzled, the sound of childish voices fell on her ear. Mindy! She leaned outward as her small sister and a little, very black boy rounded the house. They stopped beneath the window.

"We'll find her," the little boy said importantly. "I'll show you how." He bent to scrabble about the

stones bordering a bed of flowers, and came up with something pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

"This here's a *whichaway* bug," he told the enchanted Mindy. "Ask it *whichaway* she went, and it'll point with its tail. Go on, ask it."

"Whichaway did Aunt Luisa go?" Mindy breathed. Then, with a cry of delight she cried, "It's pointing *thataway*!"

The children ran to find Luisa, who snatched them both into her arms, hugging them. "You found me," she laughed, "but it wasn't fair! All right, I give up. Now what shall we do?"

"Go see the horses," Mindy shouted, jumping up and down in her excitement.

Arielle watched them walk away, Luisa in the center holding the hand of a child at either side. Stricken by an odd pang of jealousy, she started to call out to Mindy, then closed her lips. It was enough to know that Mindy was happy. The brightness of the morning had somewhat dispelled the confusions of the night. Perhaps this morning she would find some answers to the things that had been puzzling her.

As if on cue, a black smiling face appeared in the crack of an opened door. It was not Blanche, but another Negress who had been drawn from her field duties to attend Arielle. "My name's Sugar-foots," she said, bowing and grimacing to show her delight and devotion, "but you can call me Shug."

Arielle watched the woman's posturing in wonder, not understanding the woman's awe at becoming a house servant and her slavish desire to please. It took a moment to comprehend what she was trying to say.

Over her arm was a pretty morning gown, one

of Miss Luisa's that the Missus hoped the Missie would wear. And Arielle had the choice of breakfasting in her room or joining Madam Villeré downstairs.

Arielle dressed hastily in the borrowed frock, slowed only by the fumbling fingers of Shug. "But I learns, Missie," the woman kept saying, "old Shug learns fast."

Sympathizing with the woman's jittering nervousness, Arielle finally put a compassionate hand on her shoulder. "You're doing just fine, Shug. Don't worry about it. And thank you."

She left the room, leaving the Negress staring after her in wonder. She'd see to it word got around about the new little Missie. Especially to that cold fish, Ned, thinking he owned the place like he did—and his granddaughter, that uppity brightskin, Cleone—

Arielle found Madam Villeré in a small breakfast room. The woman was clad in a black cotton morning dress, with an organdy ruche that framed her face. Though she was carefully made up, there were faint lines of weariness and strain. The sun, shining through the windows, touched her hair with molten silver, echoed in the silver service before her.

For a space the two women surveyed each other, then Madam Villeré smiled in warm welcome. "Good morning, my dear. The gown becomes you. I did not realize you were such a lovely girl."

Arielle's awkward blush went unnoticed as the woman turned to Ned hovering nearby. "Bring breakfast for Miss Arielle." Then, turning back, "Would you care for a cup of this execrable New Orleans coffee?"

Pouring it, she confided, "We've always pre-

ferred ours with whipped cream and stirred with a stick of cinnamon. But I noted that Luisa was putting on weight, so—," she waved a pudgy hand as if that explained the change and Arielle hid a secret smile, pleased to see a touch of vanity in the older woman. The slim Luisa clearly had no need to watch her diet.

"Now," Madam Villeré said briskly, "I must apologize for last night. I should have come to you after my son left, but I feared you were sleeping. I am sure that you will agree with our decision."

There was a pause, and Arielle put her cup down, clasping her hands in her lap. As she feared, the marriage had not been recognized.

"Ramon is so like his father," the woman mused. "For him, there can be only one woman. And as you know, we are of the Catholic faith. A—shoddy little ceremony, performed out of our faith is just—not acceptable. Therefore—" she smiled at Arielle who had gone white, "therefore, we have planned another ceremony, to take place in one month. In the meantime, you will have instruction in our religion, a trousseau will be prepared for you, and you will have a wedding gown and a ceremony attended by loving friends and relatives."

Arielle's eyes starred with sudden tears. The older woman looked at her sharply, then rose to stand by her, drawing Arielle's head against her breast. "You didn't sleep! I should have come to you! I am so sorry! Ramon wished to talk to you, but I was afraid—he loves you so, and he is so impetuous—"

"It's quite all right," Arielle managed to say. She and Mindy would not be ejected from this garden of Eden—and her day of reckoning had been postponed.

With a motherly pat, Madam Villeré returned



to her chair. "I'm glad you take a sensible view, my dear. It speaks well for you. Now we must get to your trousseau. Blanche can take your measurements and do minor fitting. I have another girl—the laundress—who does fine sewing. Suppose we retire to my room following breakfast. We can discuss materials and patterns. And I'd like to go over the guest list with you. It will help you to know something of your husband's background. He comes of excellent stock."

"I should really check on Mindy."

"She will be all right. She is with Luisa, who loves children. Caring for them is the one area in which the girl can be trusted." There was a note of contempt in the woman's voice that didn't escape Arielle. It couldn't be possible for a mother to dislike her own daughter. She decided she must have misunderstood.

Finishing breakfast, Arielle followed Madam Villeré to her chambers, which were heavy with velvet, overcrowded with furniture, and unbearably hot. There Arielle submitted docilely to measuring, pored over patterns and materials, yielding in choice beneath the force of the older woman's domineering affection. More than anything, she wanted to escape outside into the sun. To find Mindy, from whom she'd never been separated for so long.

Finally they came to the guest list. Madam Villeré's spidery writing set forth pages of names. And she chatted most frankly, telling of various members of the family, her own story coming forth.

Her first husband, Estavan Marquez had been a man among men, with royal lineage in Spain. He might have governed these lands, had he not been

murdered in an attack on his ship by a French privateer, shortly before Ramon was born.

Arielle gasped in pity, her own sorrow still with her. The older woman smiled inwardly, knowing she had created another bond between them.

She herself, she said, was also of good blood. Her own father had been here among the earlier representatives of Spain, arriving with Count Alexander O'Reilly to subdue the French and set up an honorable rule. She'd had visions of ruling beside her Estavan, but it was not to be.

Following her husband's death, she was wooed by Monsieur Villeré, a recent widower. She had married him to have a father for Ramon. He was well-to-do and was a distant, though lesser-known connection of the great Villeré family. She'd been a good wife to him until his death and had given him a child, Luisa. But it had been a most unhappy union.

A tear blotted her page of notes, and Arielle put a hand to her arm. "I'm so sorry."

Madam Villeré straightened proudly. "I would do it again. One can endure anything for the sake of one's child. Unfortunately, Luisa inherited the traits of her father."

Again that note of dislike. Recalling the way Luisa had played with the children this morning, Arielle felt compelled to compliment the girl in some way. She held the words back. After all, the woman should know her own daughter.

Madam Villeré's features brightened and she leaned back with a relieved sigh. "At least Luisa will not be my problem much longer. There is a young man, Edward Allingham, who has been courting her. And perhaps he will overcome her silly stubborn refusals in time. Ah, his name must appear

on our list. And his sister's. And Elena Herrera, Maria Cortez—"

Tapping the tip of the pen against her cheek, the woman pondered. "I will also invite the Villerés. Jacques Villeré is Major-General of the Louisiana Militia, and his young son Gabriel is a major. They may not come with their families, since they have never accepted me. But perhaps a wedding is a time to mend fences. I shall try."

Discovering Arielle wrote a fair hand, Madam Villeré put her to work at copying invitations. Meanwhile, she sent for Ned, giving him a letter to Ramon at his town address. It contained a list of materials to be dispatched at once, for Arielle's trousseau.

The impassive Negro looked harried. The little girl, he said, had fallen into the bayou and nearly drowned. They had her in the kitchen, which was a mess—

Arielle was on her feet immediately. Ignoring Madam Villeré's advice to remain calm, she flew down the stairs. In the cavernous kitchen, a dozen chickens were turning over an open fire on a spit manipulated by a wizened old crone. The fat black cook stood by a plank table, arms wrapped in her apron as she looked disapprovingly at the scene before her. Mindy stood in a pool of mud, unrecognizable under a coat of muck, its fetid scent mingling with the odor of roasting chicken in a most unpleasant way. Luisa was fumbling futilely with the buttons at the back of the child's pinafore.

"She's all right," she said, distractedly. "Coaley managed to pull her out. I sent him out to bathe in the horse trough."

"Oh, Mindy," Arielle groaned.

Her little sister looked up, eyes and grin white in a black face. "Don't be mad," she laughed. "I slipped."

When Arielle tried to move to help in undressing the girl, Luisa pushed her away. "My gown is already soiled," she said sharply. "I can handle this."

The muddy clothing fell away. Snatching an apron from a hook on the wall, Luisa wrapped it around Mindy and, uttering endearments, carried the child from the room.

Madam Villeré arrived and viewed the debris with irritation. "Clear this up," she ordered Ned, who stood behind her, his mouth drawn with distaste. "And take the girl's older clothes to the laundry. Tell Cleone she'd better get them clean, or she'll answer to me."

Then she turned to Arielle. "You're tired. Go to your room and rest until dinner."

Meekly Arielle obeyed. But once there, she couldn't rest. Madam Villeré was a warm, motherly woman, and she supposed in time she'd come to love her. In fact, Arielle felt almost smothered with kindness. Somehow, though, she felt she'd lost control of her own destiny. At home she'd been fully responsible for Mindy—and even partially responsible for Mama. Now Mama was gone, and Mindy might as well be! Luisa had taken the child over completely—and Mindy, the rascal, didn't seem to mind a bit!

Disturbed, and even a little angry, Arielle sat down at a small writing desk. She would write a letter to be passed among her old friends at the boardinghouse she'd known as home. First, she told of Mama's tragic death, then of her own good fortune. In a month, she would be marrying a hand-

some, wealthy young man. She described Villeré-in-the-Swamp as best she could, realizing she'd never seen the outside of the house in the daylight. Then she went on to name her old friends one by one, giving each her love and a message. To Thaddeus D. Lindenwood, she wrote, "I wish you could be here to give me away."

He would do it in style, she thought, smiling, imagining the scene as she signed her name at the bottom of the page. Cape swirling, deep booming voice, he would play the part of father-of-the-bride to the hilt.

And she would have someone here who loved her, who had loved Mama, who belonged to her past. Instead, there would be only strangers, her husband's friends and relations. If only Thaddeus could come—

Folding the paper, she frowned at the futility of her wishes. Her marriage would be an accomplished fact long before this missive arrived in New York.

A tapping at the door introduced Shug, with another of Luisa's gowns over her arm. Apparently, Arielle was to dress for dinner. She sighed, wondering if Mindy had a clean frock, and if she would see her at the table. She hoped the small mud-caked garments were not beyond saving.

A vertical line marred her smooth forehead as she recalled the scene in the kitchen. "Take the girl's things to the laundry," Madam Villeré had said. "Tell Cleone she'd better get them clean."

*Cleone.* She had heard that name before somewhere. It had a familiar ring. It had come up somehow in last night's conversation, following their arrival.

It didn't matter, she thought listlessly. Now she must put on a borrowed gown she didn't want to wear and go down to a dinner for which she had little appetite. Again there was the sensation of her own life slipping from her control.

## Chapter 6

Villeré-in-the-Swamp was plunged into such a flurry of activity that Arielle had little time to ponder her situation. Slaves drawn from the fields were set to washing windows; carpets were taken up and beaten; floors and tables gleamed with a coating of beeswax. Everything was turned and aired, netted bags of potpourri placed in wardrobes and drawers. Gradually, the fragrance of the out-of-doors replaced the musty odors of a closed house.

In the kitchen, the cook was busy making small cakes of paste, fruitcakes, to be wrapped in brandy-soaked cloths. On the plank table, rose petals lay drying in their coating of sugar. The place was irresistible to Mindy and Coaley, her small black friend, and the cranky cook often paused to chase them out with her broom.

Above stairs, Arielle copied invitations until her wrist felt paralyzed. Blanche and Shug, at Madam Villeré's direction, had fashioned a dress form of stiffened muslin. The damp material was molded to Arielle's body and then cut away, to be reassembled and strengthened on the inside with strips of cane. This would be for the use of the slave who did "fine sewing," in order to fit the wedding dress, which Arielle was not to see until she donned it for the ceremony.

Within a week, the materials arrived from New Orleans. Silks, satins, velvets, delicate cottons for morning gowns, and fine lawns and laces for underthings. And with the materials was a gift from Ramon for Arielle, a pendant of star sapphires.

The driver of the cart took his horses behind the house to the watering trough, then slipped an object from beneath some straw, hiding it beneath his shirt. Strolling casually through the slave quarters on the pretext of stretching his legs, he came to the laundry where the thing he carried was passed into Cleone's hands.

She left the laundry tubs and fled into her house where she dropped the muslin-wrapped package on a plank folding table, staring at it with hurt, angry eyes. Then, wiping her soapy hands on her apron, she unwrapped the thing, gingerly, and backed away with a muffled sob. It was a book of poetry.

She forced herself to open it. There was no message, no dedication on the flyleaf—but throughout the book, someone had underlined all words of love.

For a moment, she felt a yearning that amounted to anguish. And then her face hardened.



It was a completely anonymous gift. Nowhere had he written her name, or his. A most careful man, her Ramon.

Ripping the pages from the book, she fed them to the fire, one by one.

Ramon's gift was ashes when Madam Villeré appeared at her door, followed by Ned, Blanche, and Shug, all bearing parcels. Without speaking to Cleone, the mistress directed Ned to spread sheets on the earthen floor, and on the plank table. Shug carefully set the dress form, placed on a stand measured to Arielle's height, upon the sheets, and Blanche placed her parcels on the table.

Madam Villeré opened the packages, one by one, revealing yards of shimmering satin, thick as magnolia petals, tiny seed pearls for trim and swatches of delicate veiling.

"You will be excused from the laundry for a time, Cleone. Bathilde, from the fields, will take your place. You will make a wedding dress for my son's wife-to-be." She took a look around the dim room. "And since we will need it soon and you must also sew at night, I will allow you to draw an extra ration of candles."

Cleone stood straight, her honey-colored face impassive. She would not give Madam Villeré the satisfaction of knowing how deeply this act of cruelty had struck home. When they had gone, she went to her pallet, lifting a corner of it. There, beneath a shingle, was a minor depression where she kept her treasures. A quill pen; ink made from bluing, and some scraps of paper saved from the lessons Ramon had taught her as a child. In block letters, so that her writing would not be recognized, she printed, *Governor Claiborne: A plot is afoot to aid the British from within. Look among your aides.*

After some thought, she took her one treasure, a gold piece Ramon had given her long ago, which she had been saving to buy things for the baby-to-be. The black man who had delivered the things to the big house was a free man, but he had once been a slave. He would do this thing for her, but some lagniappe might sweeten the pot.

He was ready to leave, still dawdling to gossip a bit with the stable man, when she approached him. Eyes widening at the gold, he agreed to deliver her message. And, yes, Ma'am, he would keep her secret. He would say it had been handed to him by a pretty lady—he had never seen before. A lady with long dark hair.

As he drove away, the carter looked up to see Luisa on a balcony. She had washed her hair in rainwater, and was drying it in the sun. She tossed it back, and he got a good look at her face. He reckoned he'd be able to describe her pretty well.

Cleone watched him go, then turned back to her small shack. Inside the blinding whiteness of the sheets, sheets she'd boiled and scrubbed by hand, pointed up the dimness of the single room. The pile of gleaming white satin underlined the poverty of her surroundings. When she closed the door behind her, the resultant breeze stirred the ashes of a dead fire.

Sitting down on a rickety stool, Cleone buried her face in her hands, her mind clawed with memories. Granddaughter to old Ned, product of a liaison between his daughter and some unknown white man, she'd grown up in the big house, playmate to Ramon, Luisa—and the other one, whose name they were no longer allowed to mention. Then she had become Madam Villeré's personal servant.

Most important of all, were the years of Ra-

mon's love, more exciting because it must be kept secret—the slipping away at night to hidden delights in the tall cane. And once, when Ramon's mother was away, there had been an idyllic journey by boat, drifting through the bayous and marshes where wild mallow bloomed, surrounded by masses of blue pickerelweed, white arrowhead, iris, spider-lilies, yellow pond lilies, white water lilies, and on to quiet lakes where the native lotus grew—

The sun had warmed them, the stars shining like jewels above their lovemaking. A honeymoon, Ramon had called it then. And even the mists had been kind, gathering only to hide their return from prying eyes.

Their secret had not been hidden, Cleone realized now. Madam Villeré had probably been watching their affair with fond amusement for a long time. Yet she had done nothing about it.

It was only when Cleone had found herself with child that the picture had changed. Like Eve, she had been ejected from the garden of Eden. And Ramon had not had the courage to stand beside her.

She needn't have the child, he said. Everyone was aware that old Teeny, daughter of a Haitian Mama-loa, knew ways. But she had wanted it. It was his—

With tears streaming down her cheeks she thought of the night the child was made. A night strong with the fragrance of magnolia, and a chuck-will's-widow singing somewhere. With the deep intuition of her people, she had known. And he had held her close, saying, *A baby of yours and mine? Oh, sweetheart, I hope so—*

Perhaps she should have gone to old Teeny. But it would have changed nothing. She'd been a

fool to think there could be any life for a white man and a woman touched by the tar brush. She'd been a fool to listen to his promises.

Perhaps she should see Teeny now! It was said she could call upon Papa Legba and Damballah to bring down death or misfortune on someone—for a price. In fact, her grandfather had suggested such a course of action.

Cleone pushed back her hair from her tear-wet face. She did not believe in the Mama-loa's magic. And even if she did believe old Teeny's charms and fetishes could work, she would not enlist her aid. From her mother's side had come a dark knowledge of things to come, and this foreknowledge told Cleone that Ramon Marquez, in company with his domineering mother, had embarked upon a course of self-destruction.

He had forced himself on her the other night, taken her the way a man would take a slave. And for that, she intended to help him on his way.

She looked at the dress form, noting the slender waist, the smooth flare to the hips, the firm, uptilted breasts. Not long ago, the measurements might have been her own. Again she felt a despairing bitterness.

She had a job to do, she told herself. And she must do it. The child quickened within her as she spread the exquisite white satin with soap-and-water-roughened hands.

## Chapter 7

The days passed swiftly. Arielle's gowns were completed as if by magic, and Madam Villeré viewed the results proudly. Under her loving tutelage, the girl had blossomed like a rose. The perfect wife for her son! How could any man resist such loveliness? Looking at her in the latest creation, a velvet that echoed the blue of the girl's eyes, Madam Villeré called for the sapphire pendant to be brought. It added the perfect touch. Luisa must see this.

Luisa was sent for and came, sullenly, at her mother's command. Mindy and Coaley were not far behind. Mindy was enchanted at her sister's appearance; small Coaley remained just outside the door, bobbing his head, teeth glinting in appreciation.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Madam Villeré asked.

Luisa's answer was a grudging nod. Her face hardened as her mother threw her arms about the girl in blue, saying, "You will be the daughter I've always wanted."

Then, turning to her own daughter, Madam Villeré said archly, "You'd better look to your laurels with Edward Allingham, my dear, with competition such as this. By the way, don't you want to change? The Allinghams are coming to tea."

With a sound of disgust, Luisa flounced from the room. Her mother looked after her. "I don't know what to do with that girl!"

Arielle felt embarrassed for both of them. She had a hunch that Luisa longed for her mother's approval more than anything in the world, and that Madam Villeré's doting attentions to her son—and anyone having to do with him—caused an irreparable rift.

The Allinghams' pending visit was almost welcome. For a few hours, there would be no stitching, no fitting. She would be glad to remove the hot velvet gown in exchange for one of Luisa's cooler garments. Once again she eyed a scene through the window, wishing she could be Mindy's age for just a little while.

This time, however, even Mindy was not exempt. Uncomfortable and starched, she was forced to sit on a velvet chair, with folded hands. Though she looked like something from a picture book, Arielle guessed at the mutiny behind her innocent eyes.

This was not the Allinghams' first visit. They had dropped by immediately upon hearing the news of Ramon's marriage. Privately, Arielle considered them the most boring people she'd ever met. Brother and sister, they looked enough alike to be twins,

with long pallid faces, dun-colored hair, and prominent teeth. Elizabeth's skirts hid any oddness of physique she might have had, but poor Edward did not have the advantage of such camouflage. His tight trousers revealed a tiny pot, carried high in front. His hips thrust out behind, rather full above skinny legs, giving him a peculiar elliptical shape in silhouette.

If Luisa had been interested in him, she needn't have been concerned about competition. For him, there was only one woman in the room. While his sister, who seldom spoke, ate her way through the enormous tray of refreshments that had been provided, Edward Allingham sat with his knees apart, hands upon them, devouring Luisa's face and figure with avid, protuberant eyes. Whenever he addressed a remark directly to the girl, he had a habit of swallowing, then thrusting his head forward in several rapid motions—like a duck.

To Arielle's surprise, after he'd delivered a dull and prosy speech, Luisa's face lit with a beautiful smile, and she gave a soft little hesitant laugh. Arielle turned from the girl to the speaker and saw that he seemed to be almost drowning in hope. Then she lifted her gaze—and saw Mindy.

The child had slipped behind the divan where Madam Villeré and the Allinghams were seated, and was mimicking perfectly the man's self-conscious movements.

Putting a hand over her lips to smother a laugh, Arielle tried vainly to catch her sister's eye. It was no use. Mindy was too caught up in her act. Arielle could only pray that no one turned around and saw her.

The entrance of Ned sent Mindy skittering to

her chair. A man had come with a message from Master Ramon. He was waiting in the kitchen.

Despite Madam Villeré's protestations, the Allinghams decided it was time to take their leave. After profuse farewells, the older woman excused herself. Arielle and Luisa would see them to the door.

The Allinghams went through a prolonged leave-taking. As they walked toward their waiting carriage, Elizabeth mincing along on Edward's arm, Mindy began to giggle. "He has a behind like a horse," she whispered, naughtily.

"Mindy!" Arielle tried to hide her laughter, but Luisa did not.

"Exactly," she crowed. "Do you know I've thought the same thing! Let's go get some more cakes—that is, if old greedy Elizabeth didn't eat them all!"

They disappeared into the house. Arielle felt lonely, excluded. Then it dawned on her that, for the moment, she was out of doors—and free. She felt a little naughty herself, as she hurried to get beyond the sound of Madam Villeré's call.

Rounding the house, she stopped, choosing a route. It led her toward the slave quarters. At the laundry tubs, which she could see from her window, was a huge black Negress, scrubbing clothes on a rub board while a black pot swung over a fire giving forth clouds of acrid steam. She had seen this woman for several days. The other, slighter one, who usually worked alongside her, was not in sight.

She walked up and waited until the slave raised a baleful face from her work.

"I haven't seen you here before this week," she said conversationally. "Are you new?"



"No, Ma'am. I'se Bathilde. I's a field nigguh."

"The other laundress—is she ill?"

The Negress guffawed. "No, Ma'am. Less'n you call swallying a punkin' seed bein' sick. The Missus give her another job to do."

"Oh, I see." But Arielle didn't see at all. The woman went back to her scrubbing and, mystified, Arielle walked away. She went past the kitchen gardens, and saw to her right a series of small structures. She walked in that direction to an iron fence enclosing above-ground tombs, such as were found in New Orleans. Entering, she wandered about, reading inscriptions. She found the mausoleum of Madam Villeré's deceased husband. At one side, small script introduced the occupant as *Mary Ellen Cooper Villeré*, American. So his first wife had been a fellow countrywoman! For a moment, Arielle rested a hand in blessing on the door of the tomb. At the other side, a new series of marble structures had been erected, larger and more ornate than the others. *Madam Isabella Marquez Villeré* was carved in large elaborate letters. The birth was given, the date of death left open.

It was like Madam Villeré to handle things efficiently, Arielle thought, to leave nothing to chance.

The next structure, of course, was built for Ramon. The last would be Luisa's—

Arielle stopped, open-mouthed, an eerie feeling creeping over her. *Arielle Marquez*, it read. It had been recently chiselled into the stone, fresh chips making a scattering on the ground below. Turning, she ran from the area, out from under the late afternoon shadows the tombs cast upon the grass.

She would be marrying a man she didn't know!

She would live in a too-hot house, dominated by a mother-in-law, who looked after her so well she'd even prepared her grave. Here she would die—here she would be buried—ah, God, no!

Pulling herself together, she went a little farther down the faint slope toward the house. Here was a proliferation of graves, marked with broken brick, outlined with shell. The cemetery of the slaves.

Here, she thought, she would feel more comfortable. She sat down in the sun, looking toward the house, thinking how ugly it was. The front was pure Greek style, with columns, and soft red brick. The remainder had apparently been converted to Spanish style, to suit Madam Villeré's tastes. False vegas extended beneath Spanish tiles, wrought-iron balconies indiscriminately extruded from the tabby-stuccoed walls. The two styles, which would have been beautiful separately, did not belong together. It was, decidedly, like putting lace edging on a bur-lap bag.

Her thoughts were broken by the sight of a small figure emerging from a rear door. Mindy. Arielle stood and waved, then went to meet her little sister.

"Mindy," she said, kneeling and hugging her, "I'm so glad you came out! I've been wanting to walk over the plantation with you, but I've been so busy, and you're always with Luisa—"

She stopped. Mindy had drawn a little shuddering breath, and her face was unnaturally pale. "What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing." Mindy forced a smile. "What do you want to see? The horses?"

"Just the fields and the flowers, everything out there." Arielle gestured into the distance.

"If you mean *away* over there, across the bayou, we can't go, unless Luisa sneaks over and finds there's nobody home."

"Nobody home? There's a *house*?"

Mindy nodded. "A darling house, with walls and a garden. But don't tell on us. Nobody's s'posed to know we went."

"Of course I won't tell. Not when you ask me not to."

"I don't tell secrets either," Mindy said in a troubled voice. "Arie, Aunt Luisa needs a friend, somebody more grown up than I am—"

So that's it, Arielle thought. The girl had been laying her troubles on poor little Mindy's shoulders.

"I'd like to be her friend, Mindy. But I don't think she'd like that. Sometimes people make their own problems, you know—"

"But she shouldn't have hit her," Mindy raged. "She didn't have any right to hit her!"

Arielle gripped the girl's shoulders. "That's enough, Mindy! Now, tell me! What in heaven's name are you talking about?"

Mindy raised her white face, eyes blank with shock. "Madam Villeré told Luisa she had a message from Ramon. She said someone wrote to Governor Claiborne and got Ramon in trouble, and she knew who did it. And then she hit her. And then she hit her again—"

"She wouldn't do a thing like that," Arielle gasped. "Mindy, you misunderstood! It's your imagination!"

The little girl's face closed, and she turned away. Finally, she said, "Arielle, can I sleep with you tonight?"

"Of course you can, sweetheart. I've missed you

so! But you must make things right with your Aunt Luisa, so her feelings won't be hurt."

"It doesn't make any difference," the child said, bleakly. "Her mother's locked her in her room. She can't get out, and I can't get in."

Arielle was certain there was an explanation for the scene Mindy had witnessed. When Luisa didn't appear at dinner, she began to feel concern. Madam Villeré was silent, her face pale and lined beneath the paint and powder. She didn't seem to have much appetite and finally pushed her plate away.

"I'm sorry, girls. There is much on my mind. Someone spread a rumor that there was treasonable activity among Governor Claiborne's aides. Poor Ramon, among others, was forced to undergo a two-hour interrogation. No evidence was found that incriminated anyone, but this kind of thing leaves a shadow."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Arielle said sincerely.

"All's well that ends well," the woman sighed. "However, in my state of nerves, I lost my temper at Luisa's rudeness. Now she has locked herself in her room, and refuses to come down."

Arielle shot a look at Mindy that said, "You see? You did misunderstand." To Madam Villeré, she said, "I'm sure Luisa will come to her senses. Things will look brighter in the morning."

The woman smiled. "You have a warm and loving heart, I do not know how I could manage without you. Soon you will be my daughter in truth. Did I tell you your wedding gown is almost completed? It is a copy of the one I wore when I married Ramon's father, my Estavan. I hope it will bring you happiness."

Arielle jumped up impulsively and went to the

older woman's side. Putting her cheek against the painted, powdered one, she whispered, "You are very kind." Certainly Madam Villeré was domineering, but it was due to her strength of character. The girl felt guilty at having doubted her basic goodness for a moment. The sulky Luisa must, indeed, be a trial. To have had Arielle's wedding gown copied from her own—what a sweet and loving thought—

The dress, with its spreading skirts, fitted on the dressform, shimmered in Cleone's dim cabin, like the ghost of a headless bride. The girl, her golden eyes swollen with strain, took an anxious look at the flickering candle as she put in the finishing stitches to the hem. And in doing so, she pricked her finger.

She paid little attention. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last. For in the morning, she would have to attach the tiny seed pearls to the ruffle surrounding the neckline. The gown was cut low, baring the bride's shoulders. The ruffle, Cleone supposed, was to give a virginal touch.

Rising painfully from her knees, she surveyed her creation, adjusting the bodice where the ruffle would fall.

The candle failed at last, and Cleone rubbed her eyes. It was the last one, and she'd had little rest. The seed pearls would have to wait until tomorrow.

She went to her pallet and dreamed of drifting through the bayous, Ramon beside her, their bodies brown and honey in the sun, dappled with leaf shadows as the boat bumped aimlessly along the bank, and Ramon teased her into passion with his warm mouth, his hands, the length of his young body against her own.

"We've got to find an island where I can love you properly," he whispered.

Then they were on land, running recklessly through the marshy places, reaching a grassy spot beneath live oaks, carpeted with flowers. "Love me," he said.

In her hand, she carried a shell, purple and white on the outside, with a convoluted heart of glowing pink. As he reached for her, she dropped it. It turned into a scattering of seed pearls. Sobbing, she knelt to pick them up. "Love me," he said, his voice moving farther away.

"I can't," she moaned. "Madam Villeré will be angry. You'll have to wait."

"Love me!" His voice grew faint, and after a while, she couldn't hear it at all.

She woke, shivering despite the heat. How long was she to be haunted with such dreams? The light slanting through the window indicated it was well past dawn. She had overslept. She could hear the sounds of the slave quarter stirring.

Rising, aching in every part of her body, she went to the plank table, slitting her eyes in order to thread the slender beading needle with silk. Then she approached the shimmering gown and lifted the ruffle.

The needle dropped from her hand, and she drew in her breath with a sharp sound. On the bodice of the gown, directly over the heart, was a spot of blood. "Oh God," Cleone said like a prayer. "Oh God!"

"If I find one flaw in that gown," Madam Villeré had told her only yesterday, "you go to the fields. If you don't want to be a field hand, just keep that in mind."

The spot didn't show. The ruffle would cover it.

But the meticulous woman would find it. And she did not make idle threats.

Cleone shrugged. What difference did it make? She couldn't seem to care anymore. She smiled bitterly. When Ramon made his marriage vows, he would be taking this little bit of Cleone. And if she could only believe in old Teeny's charms and curses, she'd consider this an omen that boded ill for the marriage of the man she once loved—and his little white bride.

## Chapter 8

Exactly one month from the day Arielle and Mindy arrived at Villeré-in-the-Swamp, a small entourage approached the plantation, coming from New Orleans. Ramon, in the lead on his tall black horse, looked anything but the picture of a happy bridegroom.

When his anger had settled after leaving Cleone that night, he'd known dismally that he was wrong. Cleone was too proud to settle for the life of a mistress. And he could never love another woman. The only answer would have been to take her and run away far to the north, where they could at least live as man and wife.

He'd thought about it, planning to slip back and discuss it with her, making peace. But the thought of displeasing his mother made him delay.



He knew she'd find a way to stop them, and he was filled with a kind of hopelessness.

If she didn't stop them, if they could escape, then could he be happy, knowing he'd destroyed all his mother's hopes and dreams? The worry gnawed at him, and then he would think of his slim, honey-colored girl. Ah, Cleone!

So he had waited and wavered. He'd obeyed his mother in sending materials for the girl's trousseau. After all, Arielle should have something from the situation. Gradually, he had come to a determination. He would go to Cleone. He would take her away from the plantation—defy his mother to be with his love.

On the day of his planned visit to Cleone he had been called into Governor Claiborne's office. The governor had been informed of a rumor that one of his aides was not to be trusted. Since Marquez represented a Spanish element, he was particularly suspect.

Shaken, Ramon had blurted out that he was soon to be married—to an American.

Claiborne's expression had softened. "Well," he said with a pleased smile, "well! May I assume that I will be invited to the wedding?"

"Certainly, Sir." Ramon's response was mechanical.

Claiborne pulled at his ear in thought. "I should imagine General Villeré will attend, and young Major Gabriel Villeré?"

"They have received invitations," Ramon said stiffly.

"Then perhaps I can combine business with pleasure. I would also like young Louis Daumont to attend. His loyalty is beyond question. Then we can confer with the Villerés after the ceremony." He

leaned back wearily, closing his eyes. "I shall look forward to a bit of relaxation. My God, man, this has been a year. That damn Laffite with his illegal activities has almost driven me up the wall. He walks around town like he owns it. And worse—" he paused.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Worse, Congress has increased the army to twenty-five thousand, yet they have none to spare for the protection of New Orleans. And Laffite has more than a thousand men under his control."

"I don't understand."

"Hull was forced to surrender Detroit to the British; the attack on Montreal failed. Things are going badly in the north. Now it is said the British talk of sailing up the river from the Gulf to take this area. And there's a possibility Laffite's ruffians might join with them. If they do, it opens the door to invasion."

Ramon's mind worked quickly. "In any event, Sir, we will give a good accounting of ourselves."

Governor Claiborne sighed. "I daresay." Then he picked up his pen. "Now, if you will give me the time of the wedding, and the date—"

Ramon retired to his quarters, his course of action again lost in confusion. He had been suspected of subversive activities, but his forthcoming marriage to an American had earned the governor's trust. From here on, he would be privy to the inner circles of decision-making. And when he passed word on to his British allies, he would be closer to his goal. It was all working out, miraculously.

Except with Cleone.

Now, riding ahead of the small procession heading for his wedding, he knew that except for his conversation with Claiborne that day, he and Cle-

one would have been far from his mother's reach. Mentally he cursed the writer of the note that brought about the questioning—and then the bestowal of the governor's trust.

The messenger had described the sender most graphically. A dark-haired woman. It could have been no one but Luisa.

Frowning, Ramon spurred his horse to a faster gait, bringing teasing comments on a bridegroom's impatience from Claiborne and Daumont.

He slowed, however, as he crossed the arched wooden bridge and saw the carriages lining the drive. The guests had arrived and the festivities were in full swing. The scene lacked only the bridegroom. There would be no way to steal a moment before the ceremony. He had wanted one more chance to reason with Cleone.

Since early that morning, Arielle had been sequestered in her room. No one knew exactly when the groom would arrive, and it was bad luck to be seen by him on one's wedding day. The guests were scheduled to begin arriving at noon, and it was far more dramatic to descend in one's wedding gown. Arielle submitted obediently to Madam Villeré's instructions.

For a time it seemed her chamber was crowded with people. Blanche brought in the wedding gown, carefully shrouded in sheets. Shug carried buckets of water for a scented bath. Luisa, already dressed for the ceremony, arrived to do magical things with Arielle's long dark hair. Pinned high on her head, it gave her a deceptive appearance of fragility.

Arielle watched Luisa in the mirror. Absorbed in her work, the girl lost her petulant look, eyes and lips softening. The gown she wore was of deep rose with layers of chiffon in gradations that ended in

palest pink. As a result, the girl looked like a rose herself.

"Luisa, you're beautiful," Arielle blurted.

A warm tide of color tinted the girl's features, erasing the harsh lines of discontent. For a moment, she laid a hand hesitantly on Arielle's shoulder, then jerked it away, pinning up an errant lock with a force that brought tears to Arielle's eyes.

Madam Villeré was right, Arielle thought. Luisa was impossible.

Ramon's mother bustled in; her gown, fit for a queen, was black, sweeping, glittering with jet. An ornate Spanish comb adorned her piled mass of silver hair.

"Luisa—ah, you are finished with her hair. Good." She walked around Arielle, who had sat for the operation in camisole and petticoats, and studied her with a critical eye. "You've done very well," she told Luisa grudgingly. "Now find Mindy and see that she's dressed properly for the occasion. Shug will help you. Blanche, you are to check on the state of the refreshment tables, then see that all is well in the kitchen. I wish to be alone with Arielle for a time."

Madam Villeré was suffering from fear and doubt, both ailments alien to her nature. The very force of her personality usually carried her through to an accomplished goal. But today was different.

For one thing, Ramon had become most unpredictable of late. Suppose he disobeyed her command to come? There could hardly be a wedding without a groom.

For another, though Arielle had blossomed into an enchanting creature, given proper clothing and attention, she was still a young, virginal girl. How could she compete, in bed, with an experienced

little bitch like Cleone—who had probably slept with every nigger in the quarters? She'd been a fool to let that relationship get started! But she'd only considered it the normal behavior of a growing boy—

Drawing up a chair before Arielle, she sat, taking the younger girl's hands in her own. "I want to talk to you as your mother would," she said softly. "Arielle, do you know what is expected of you? The *personal* relationship between husband and wife?"

Arielle blushed. "Why, yes," she said uncertainly, "I suppose I do. I suppose you mean the marriage bed, having children—"

"There is more than that," Madam Villeré sighed. "Even the finest of men has a touch of the animal in his nature. A wife must cater to that part of him, develop the ability to arouse him as no other woman can, else she may be replaced with a mistress. She must woo him, seduce him, use her body—"

There followed a lengthy oration on the art of seduction couched in euphemisms. It was really no different, Arielle thought, than what Mama had said, except Mama had said it in plain language. Poor Madam Villeré was laboring over it so that Arielle felt a wild desire to laugh. She controlled it, her mouth trembling, and Madam Villeré misunderstood.

"There, dear! I've frightened you! But I am certain you will fulfill your duties, no matter how repugnant they seem. Now," she rose, seemingly relieved that the ordeal had ended, "I will send Blanche to you and you may dress. Ramon should be arriving soon."

The door closed behind her, and a muffled giggle sounded from behind the four-poster bed. Ari-

elle's face flamed. "Mindy! You little devill! Come out of there."

Mindy emerged, hair awry and face suffused with laughter. "Oh, Ariel! Mama would have died laughing!" She drew her face into solemn, pompous lines. "I am certain you will fulfill your duties," she mimicked, "no matter how repugnant they are—"

The two girls were both overcome with mirth when Blanche walked in, her black face shadowed with disapproval. "Such goin's on at a time like this! Miss Mindy, they lookin' for you. You better git!"

Still giggling, Mindy left the room. Blanche turned to the standing form and began removing the sheets that concealed the wedding gown. "Now, Miss Arielle, I he'p you dress."

A few minutes later, Arielle stood before the pier glass, looking at a stranger. A tall slender girl, blue eyes dominating the pale oval of her face, her shoulders rising like ivory from a ruffle that edged a tight bodice and rounded her arms to support sheer bell-like sleeves. Her skirts spread gracefully, emphasizing a narrow waist. It was a dress from a dream.

It was unbelievable that anything so beautiful had been made by human hands. Arielle lifted a ruffle edged with seed pearls. They were exquisite, each sewn separately. It must have taken many hours. Then she gave a sudden little cry.

Blanche looked up from where she knelt adjusting the hem. "Somethin' wrong?"

"No," Arielle whispered, looking at the tiny bloodstain over her heart. "Nothing at all."

Suddenly the gown lost all its beauty for her. It had been sewn by some slave woman, who had put in hours of back-breaking toil so that she, Arielle, might wear it for a single occasion. The spot wasn't

noticeable beneath the ruffle. If Madam Villeré saw it, she would say the blood was her own.

There was a light tap and Coaley appeared at the door. Endearing in miniature livery, he looked at Arielle, grinning widely in approval. "Massa Ramon done arrive," he said, importantly. "Missus said to tell you Governor Claiborne hissef done come with him. Ned's tunin' up his fiddle. When you hears the music, you s'posed to come down the stairs. Then you take the governor's arm. He goin' give you away."

Arielle took her position, just out of sight of the audience below, grateful that Blanche was by her side. Her whole body trembled, and she felt faint. But when the strains of music began, she lifted her head. Like a vision, she drifted down the stairs, deaf to the sighs that lifted from the watchers.

Reaching the foot, she put her small hand on the arm of a man she'd never met, walking forward to become the wife of a man she did not know—before a gathering of strangers.

## Chapter 9

Ramon Marquez looked at the cool, poised woman descending the stairs, and experienced a moment of terror. The girl he rescued on Royal Street in New Orleans, whom he had married in a hasty ceremony in the Lanier parlor, had seemed a child. This was a beautiful, ripely contoured woman—who would expect more from him than it was in his power to give.

Damn his mother for her importuning! Damn himself for his weak will! He'd thought bringing home a wife would solve his problems. Now he had a notion his problems had just begun.

Madam Villeré's fears had vanished. Ramon was here. And having the governor escort the bride was a touch of genius, making what amounted almost to a family tie. Ramon would be trusted in government circles. It would help in the days to



come. He would be able to gather much information.

She was proud of her efforts, too. A sliding wall between the parlor and dining room had been opened, thus creating a vast ballroom. At one end, Ned with his violin and two other slaves with guitar and mandolin, were concealed by a huge potted flowering plant. At the other end, more doors had been opened to reveal the family chapel, with its tapestries and an elaborate prie-dieu. Its entrance was a bower of white blossoms. Throughout the larger room, flowers were banked around low tables set against the wall to allow for dancing, and vines and blooms were woven in the chandeliers above.

At the sound of the violin, the milling throng of guests was hushed. Her eyes on the chapel, Madam Villeré watched the priest take his place, then Ramon. How handsome he was—like Estavan. She saw him flinch a little, his eyes widening with shock as a sigh sounded through the room, and she smiled knowingly. He had seen the bride.

Turning, she watched Arielle come down the stairs, and felt an inner glow of satisfaction. No man would be able to resist this lovely creature. Especially Ramon, born of her passion and Estavan's. How gracefully Arielle moved, as if she were dreaming.

Arielle was not dreaming. Facing a battery of strangers' eyes, her mind, in defense, had gone blank. Placing her hand on Claiborne's arm, she moved like a sleepwalker, letting him guide her as he would. Reaching the chapel, she recognized the face of Father Joseph, who'd been giving her religious instruction these last weeks, and seized upon it like a beacon. Deaf to all sound, she watched his lips move, and somehow made the proper responses.

She heard Ramon's voice from far away. And then it was done, and her new husband placed a chaste kiss upon her cheek. She felt nothing.

Hubbub broke loose as they stepped from the chapel. Madam Villeré rushed forward, hugging Arielle to her bosom, crying, "My daughter!" Then she was hugged and kissed by a bewildering number of strangers, wanting only to pull away, to run—

It was only when Mindy caught at her arm, face shining with delight, that everything came into focus. "Oh, Arie," the little girl said excitedly, "you look so beautiful! And this time, it's *legal*."

During the next few hours, Arielle decided wedding festivities were meant to serve a purpose—that of keeping the bride and groom apart. She was commandeered by her new mother-in-law, who steered her to women seated on gilt chairs around the wall, and was introduced to so many people her head swam.

She knew Elizabeth Allingham, of course. She would always remember Maria Cortez because of a quick glance of hatred, smoothed over by social amenities. Elena Herrera had a sweet face. Perhaps she might be a friend. It was clear the ladies of the Villeré family were here only from duty, and that they disliked her mother-in-law. Arielle was happy to see they warmed toward her a little. As dusk fell, she was still surrounded by chattering women. Soon a light supper would be served, then there would be alcoholic beverages for the gentlemen, mild sherry for the ladies, and dancing.

The men had gathered into several clusters in a far corner of the room, where Claiborne was the central figure of the largest cluster. The group included the military Villerés, and, surprisingly, Ramon—though the other groups were made up of

Spanish people, including many of the Marquez relations. The male talk was all of war, whether or not Madison had made a mistake in following such a course. Claiborne thought that he had.

"Good God, man," General Villeré boomed. "They've been impressing our seaman right and left! We can't let the English walk all over us. There was no other turn he could take!"

"We're getting whipped soundly in the north," Claiborne growled. "And what if the British should attack from the Gulf? Look at the position we're in! Do you realize that we're short of men, of cap and powder? And if they offer that damned Laffite enough, he'll join them—"

Surprisingly, General Villeré demurred. "I can't agree with you on that, Claiborne. The man may be a privateer, pirate, smuggler—whatever you want to call him—but he's honest, according to his lights. I think we should deal with him."

"Good God! Deal with a renegade? A murderer? Trust you Frenchmen to hang together!"

Villeré stiffened. The two men glared at each other, then the governor moved away from the touchy subject. "By George! Look at Daumont. Is that astonishingly pretty girl your sister, Marquez? He certainly seems taken with her!"

Luisa and Louis Daumont were being watched by other eyes as well. Despite Madam Villeré's preoccupation with her new daughter-in-law, she had noticed the couple out of the corner of her eye. Edward Allingham had noticed, too, his hands twisting nervously as he watched from afar. Finally, he approached Madam Villeré, his long face worried. He whispered to her. The older woman nodded.

"Daumont?" she said. "Is that the name?"

French! I'll soon break it up. Luisa should be moving among the guests. Edward, perhaps you will be kind enough to remain with Arielle until I return." Hard-eyed, she moved across the floor toward the young couple.

Arielle's eyes followed her. Ramon had never looked at her as Daumont looked at Luisa, she thought. Suddenly, the room seemed too hot, too filled with people. And this would be going on for hours. How her head ached! If only she could get out of the commotion for a little while.

"I hope you will excuse me," she whispered to Allingham, whose protuberant eyes were fixed on Luisa and the young Frenchman. "The day has exhausted me. Perhaps I should take advantage of my mother-in-law's absence to refresh myself. Perhaps a dash of cold water, and some cologne—"

Properly and effusively sympathetic, he accompanied her to a door behind the musicians. It would attract less attention, she told him, if she used the servants' stairs. But once the door was closed between them, she turned in the other direction, using an exit that led to the grounds outside.

It was nearly dark. Finding her way to a small garden at the far side of the house, she sank down on a bench beneath a crape myrtle, savoring the night air with its scent of honeysuckle and jasmine. Glumly she thought of the long hours ahead.

Evidently, the party was just getting under way. She would not have a chance to speak with her new husband until they reached the marriage bed. It was an awful way to begin a marriage. Why hadn't anyone considered her feelings in all of this? Shouldn't a new bridegroom have stayed beside his bride? And shouldn't he have been watching her? Knowing that she'd left the house? Maybe if he had

followed her, just been beside her for a few moments in the sweet night air, she wouldn't feel the strangeness of the situation as she did.

As if in answer to her unspoken wish, a pair of hands slipped over her eyes. A man's hands. A thrill ran through her body as she put up her own to cover them. The feeling was warm, good, and in her heart, she exulted. Thank God! Oh, thank God! The first hurdle was over. She'd been wondering how she'd feel when Ramon touched her.

Still keeping her eyes covered, the man behind her edged past the flowering shrub and around the bench, where he pulled her to her feet, pressing his hard body against hers in an ardent embrace. "Ramon," she said, raising her face from where it rested against his pounding heart. "Oh, Ramon—"

She paused in shock. The face above her was not her husband's, but that of a man she'd never seen before. Where Ramon's eyes were soft, this man's were mocking, brilliant with laughter. "Surely," he said, "a brother may kiss the bride."

Before she could escape, he had crushed her to him. His mouth sought hers, parting her lips in a kiss that burned through to her very soul. Her knees went weak, and he lifted her, molding her body against his own in a way that made her senses swim.

Setting her down at last, he gripped her shoulders, looking her up and down with a critical eye. "Sweet, and hot. Brother Ramon did himself proud. But I wonder if he'll know what to do with you—"

The melting lassitude she'd felt in his embrace was fading, to be replaced by fury. Her mother had taught her how to handle herself if attacked by a stranger. But her instructions didn't allow for a cumbersome wedding gown. Trying to control her

hammering pulse, she said, quietly, "Kindly release me. If you do not, I shall scream."

"Go right ahead. It will make a good story. The black sheep brother is not invited to the wedding. He kisses the bride. Ramon will have to call me out. One of us will die—"

"No!" The cry burst from her lips without volition.

He eyed her curiously. "You do love him then. Please convey my congratulations to Ramon. As for you, lovely lady, I wish you good luck. You will need it in this house."

Then he was gone, as silently as he came. Arielle was alone, except for the tiny lanterns of darting fireflies and the trill of a chuck-will's-widow—

She hurried into the house. As she entered the door to the ballroom, she came face to face with Madam Villeré. The older woman's face softened in relief. "I was concerned about you," she said. "I was just coming to see if you were all right. You were quite pale. I'm glad to see you looking so much better."

Arielle caught sight of herself in a mirror. Her eyes were luminous and she had a splash of color to her cheeks.

Self-consciously, she smoothed the front of her rumpled wedding gown as Governor Claiborne came forward to claim the first dance.

## Chapter 10

Arielle gave silent thanks to Old Mimi Latour, back at the boardinghouse, many times during the evening. Her ballet lessons, combined with a natural feel for movement and music, made her the most sought-after woman on the floor. And whirling from the arms of one partner to another gave her less time to think of her encounter in the garden—and of what awaited her after the festivities.

Throughout the evening she was uncomfortably aware of Luisa on the sidelines. The girl sat stiffly on a chair between the Allinghams, refusing to dance with anyone. Young Louis Daumont watched her from a distance with hurt, puzzled eyes.

Ramon remained intent on the conversation to which the governor returned after the one dance. Finally, he was prodded by his mother into dancing with Arielle.

She went into his arms willingly. And was dismayed that the contact brought no reaction. It's because I'm tired, she thought. Then she wondered, with horror, if she could be like Mama. Mama was only happy with a man until she had him, then she was ready to move on to the next.

But I haven't had him yet, she thought. When they were alone together, the feelings a wife should have for her husband would come. And she was lucky. He was a very handsome man. She smiled up at him, and he stumbled a little. His eyes were a bit glassy, his mouth a little slack. It was evident he'd been drinking too much.

"I'm very tired," she said. "Do you mind if we don't finish this dance?"

With a look of relief, he returned her to Madam Villeré.

"I haven't seen Mindy," she called as they approached her mother-in-law. "And I'm a little worried."

"I saw her a moment ago," Elena Herrera answered, smiling. "She and the little darky are asleep curled up at the top of the stairs like a couple of kittens. A precious sight."

"How old is Mindy now?" Madam Villeré asked suddenly.

"Eight."

The older woman pulled at her lip. "Girls mature early in this climate. Yes, I would say at about eleven. I will sell the boy off in three more years."

"Sell Coaley?" Arielle's cry was one of alarm.

"Slaves are male and female, daughter. And sometimes older, wiser heads must prevent their children from making fools of themselves."

"Madam Villeré, are you insinuating—"

Arielle stopped, helplessly. Her mother-in-law



wasn't listening. She and Ramon were glaring at each other. Elena Herrera broke up the conversation. "I do believe Governor Claiborne is getting ready to leave—"

First the governor went, along with Louis Daumont. Then the Villerés took their leave, murmuring coldly polite responses to their hostess, issuing an invitation to Arielle to visit them at their home, known as Beká. The invitation was not extended to include her husband or her mother-in-law.

Finally the guests dwindled to a few Marquez families. The men were slightly intoxicated and seemed to be involved in some mysterious grandiose planning. Luisa had gone upstairs, taking little Mindy to bed, and Madam Villeré was attempting to keep the wives of the drunken guests mollified.

"You look exhausted," she said to Arielle. "Go on to bed, child. Ramon will join you soon. I'll call Blanche to help you."

"Please don't. I'd like to be alone for a while."

The older woman stood and kissed her. "Good night, daughter. This has been the second happiest day of my life. You will find my gift to you, lying across your pillow."

Arielle climbed the stairs, trembling with fatigue. The room was hot, with its ever-present fire. She crossed to the window, opening it. Let Ramon close it if he feared the infiltration of the night. Turning, she recalled the gift her mother-in-law mentioned. She drew aside the netting and caught her breath in amusement and dismay.

Madam Villeré had been sincere in her little talk this morning. Across Arielle's pillow lay a filmy nightdress of sheer material. It was clearly intended for seduction. Dear Heaven! She could not wear that!

She went to the chest where her old gowns were kept. They were all gone. Her mother-in-law had left nothing to chance. Maybe she was right. The Spanish had, perhaps, a different view. Ramon might not be too thrilled at the sight of his new wife in a high-necked flannel gown.

Hurriedly, she undressed, fumbling at the hooks of the magnificent gown. She laid it aside carefully, thinking how sad it was that so much painstaking work had gone into a dress that would never again be worn.

A pitcher of cool perfumed water stood by her basin. She sponged her naked body, enjoying the fresh feeling it gave her, then slipped into the revealing gown. Tonight, as Mama had suggested, she would leave one candle burning.

She walked to the mirror, candle in hand, and blushed at what she saw. The full gown stood away, her own flesh showing through it in tints of pearl.

She thought of how she might appear to a man. And it wasn't of Ramon she thought, but of the other one—the man who had come to her in the garden, kissing her with burning lips, holding her in a way she'd never been held before.

Realizing the trend of her thoughts, her eyes widened with horror. She set down the candle and fled to the big bed with its protective veiling, where she lay shivering, trying to blot the memory of another man from her mind—while she waited for her bridegroom to come.

It was nearly dawn, when she heard the door to her sitting room open and Ramon's voice, sounding loud and quarrelsome. She sat up, straining to listen, believing she heard Madam Villeré also. Then the door slammed shut, and a single pair of footsteps stumbled across the outer room. There was a crash,

a sound of muffled swearing, and the door to the bedchamber opened. Ramon stood there, swaying.

Another step and he stumbled once more, crashing to the floor.

Instantly, Arielle was running toward him. "Ramon, are you hurt?" She knelt, taking his head in her arms. His eyes were closed, and there was an ugly cut on his forehead. "Ramon!"

His eyes opened, and he looked at her with what appeared to be sheer revulsion. "So white," he mumbled. "So white! No matter what she says, I can't! I can't! Oh, Arielle, I'm sorry—"

Then he was violently ill.

With tender, consoling words, she helped him to his feet. He stumbled toward the dressing room that led to the connecting bedchamber with masculine appointments. Supporting him, Arielle let him go where he would go.

He fell across his bed. She removed his boots, and then his soiled clothes. Deliberately, she let her gaze range along the beautiful, hard-muscled male body.

She felt nothing. It would appear neither of them desired the other. Her eyes returned to his face. He looked like a small sleeping boy.

Perhaps that's what he is, she thought, tiredly, pulling a sheet over his recumbent body. Harry Fosbie's mother, too, had been a domineering woman. Perhaps Madam Villeré, realizing too late that her son had a problem, had been happy to shift the responsibility to her. That would be the reason for the lecture this morning and the seductive bedgown—

She was tied to a man who could not, or would not, be able to function as a natural husband. She faced a life in this house, with a dominating, though

loving, mother-in-law, without a normal man's affections. There would be no children. How could they live together? What would they talk about? What would they find to do?

Maybe, she thought wryly, they could take up tatting—like Harry Fosbie and his mother for want of something better to do. She began to laugh, and her laughter turned to tears.

Carefully she cleaned the carpet, knowing instinctively this was something the servants should not know. Then she climbed into the big bed, alone.

In her mind, she felt strong hands gripping her shoulders, heard an amused voice saying, *Sweet, and hot. Brother Ramon did himself proud. But I wonder if he'll know what to do with you.*

Her face grew hot as she thought—he knew! He knew all along!

Brother, he'd said. But who in God's name was he? Why hadn't she heard of him before? And why had he come to torment her with such tremulous feelings—on the loneliest night of her life.

## Chapter 11

Arielle slept fitfully. She finally rose at the sounds of servant activity below. She longed to call for hot water to be brought to her, but no one, not even a slave, would know of her humiliation if she could help it.

Splashing her face with cold water, she donned a bright morning gown and tried to pinch some color into her cheeks. Her eyes were darkly circled. She looked older than her years. Well, she thought, it is said marriage ages one. And I can vouch for it.

A tap at the dressing room door startled her. She whirled about, forcing herself into a semblance of calm before she said, "Come in."

Ramon stood in the doorway, clad in shirt, breeches, and boots. His face was pale, his eyes showing the evidence of his drinking the night before. But they were haunted and pleading.

"Arielle, I must talk to you. I want to apologize. In marrying you I've done you a disservice."

She stared at him. There was no resemblance to the gallant who had rescued her from Cora and Gambi. His eyes seemed ready to fill with tears. The sensuous mouth trembled—as Mindy's did when she'd been naughty. Even in this condition, he was devastatingly handsome—and she had an uncontrollable desire to put her arms about him and say, "It's all right."

Instead, she said coolly, "Sit down."

He took the chair she indicated beside a small table and buried his face in his hands.

"Why *did* you marry me?" she asked.

"I thought it was a way out for both of us. A child with no place to go—and I had made a promise to my mother. I thought we might work something out—"

"And then you found I was not a child."

His face lifted, suffusing with color. "That is true. And I cannot be a husband to you, Arielle. There are reasons. I can't explain. Maybe some day, if I can only clarify my—but not now. Oh God, I'm sorry—"

Arielle felt a little sick. "There's no need to explain. But what do you want of me? Must Mindy and I return to New Orleans?"

His eyes filled with fear. "Do you wish to? I will not hold you here against your will. But we are legally married. To the world, we are husband and wife. I—I have business in New Orleans, and I will be here very little. I'll try to solve my problems, but until I do, if you could pretend—and we could be friends—"

"In other words, your mother is not to know."

He flinched at the bald truth in her words. "I

suppose that's what I'm saying." He looked defeated, beaten.

She turned away. She and Mindy had no place to go, and Mindy loved it here. She supposed it was the thought of being *used* that was so degrading. Yet she'd promised things in her marriage vows. Things that had nothing to do with the marriage bed. She'd promised to love, to obey, to care for him in sickness and in health. And his problem was a kind of sickness.

She held out her hand. "We will be friends."

His expression of relief was overwhelming. At least, Arielle thought, she had wrung one emotional response from her new husband—a deep and undying gratitude.

Prosaically, as if planning a day's schedule, they set about plotting their deception. He would try to be gone as much as possible. When he was home, he would sleep in his bed, Arielle in hers. The servants would be told they were not to enter until rung for. There was nothing unusual about two young people in love resenting intrusions.

Ramon looked at Arielle, reddening again. "There must be no evidence. And it is not unusual for the servants to inspect the marriage bed when they make it up. I'm not sure what—"

"I know what to do," Arielle said tartly. "Tend your room, so that it will appear to have been unoccupied. I'll take care of this one."

A short time later, they descended to find a flurry of activity. Servants bustled here and there, busily restoring the house to its former immaculate state. Madam Villeré was in the breakfast room. At the door, Ramon braced himself, then placed his arm about his wife. "Mamacita," he said in a happy-sounding voice, "good morning!"

Watching the two of them as they hardly touched the breakfast that was brought, the older woman felt an immense satisfaction. It had worked out well. Ramon's face was haggard, which could be laid to last night's drinking. The girl had dark circles under her eyes, as if she hadn't slept at all. Perhaps he hadn't let her, Madam Villeré thought with a naughty, inward chuckle.

The sheer gown had done its work. And Arielle was not only a beauty, but an intelligent one. Apparently the little talk yesterday had borne fruit. Madam Villeré was looking forward to the advent of her first grandchild. The one that would be born in the slave quarters would not count.

Anxious to be free of his mother's prying, knowing eyes, Ramon suggested a walk. Arielle agreed, brightening with relief. It would be good to get out in the sun, she thought. In the month she had been here, Madam Villeré had kept her a virtual prisoner. Each time she'd felt like exploring, there had been invitations to write, gowns to be fitted, religious instruction. Sometimes, she'd felt Madam Villeré invented reasons to keep her housebound.

In the night, she'd decided that becoming Ramon's wife—if indeed she would be regarded as such—gave her some authority of her own. She intended to discuss the matter with Ramon now.

"Shall we walk toward the slave quarters?"

He seemed to pale, but perhaps it was her imagination. "Let's walk toward the fields. Have you seen the sugar mill?"

"I have seen nothing—except the cemetery," she said ruefully. "I've been unable to leave the house." Then, "Speaking of the house, Ramon, I can't be useless. I'd like to speak with your mother in regard to taking over some of her duties."



"I don't believe that would be possible," he said, sounding uncomfortable.

"But if I am to live here as your wife—"

"The property is only mine in trust. While my mother lives, she has all authority. The land is hers, the slaves as well. My stepfather set it up that way. Only at her death does it pass into my hands. She—she guards her position jealously."

"I see." Arielle frowned. It was clear that her position had not changed. She would live here as an unbedded wife, and an honored guest. A thought came to her. "Perhaps I could help with plantation affairs. I am very good at figures—"

"The overseer, Davis, handles all that," Ramon said, troubled. "Under Mamacita's supervision, of course."

Again Arielle's brow furrowed in disappointment. "I haven't met Mr. Davis."

"Haven't you?" Ramon's face cleared. "Then we will stop by his house and introduce you right now." He gestured toward a small neat structure just ahead of them.

Davis wasn't in, though he would be in a few moments. April Davis, young, pregnant, with lank hair framing a bright face, was thrilled at their visit. She ushered them proudly into a house that, though rather bare, gleamed with cleanliness. The wide plank floors were bleached white from lye-water scrubbing. Rickety furniture, evidently ancient discards from the big house, gleamed with beeswax.

She seated them at the table and brought glasses of cold buttermilk. Golden cornbread and daffodil-yellow butter echoed the sun shining through a glistening pane. Arielle, having eaten next to nothing since the previous day, unable to swallow under

the prying eyes of her mother-in-law, was suddenly famished. April Davis beamed as her honored guests did justice to the plain fare.

Jim Davis came home, carefully removing his boots at the door. A lanky, dark-haired man with worried eyes, he smiled lovingly at his wife, acknowledged his introduction to Arielle with an awkward bow, then turned to Ramon.

"I been needin' to have a talk with you," he said. "May cost me my job, but I don't like workin' pregnant women in the field."

Ramon stiffened, his face growing dark. Davis looked at his wife, who took her cue. "I'd like to show you the cradle Jim made for our baby, Missus Marquez. It's here, in the other room."

Arielle followed her hostess into a small, white-washed room with a bed covered by a patchwork quilt. In the corner stood the cradle, carefully hand-crafted. It was made up with sheets of bleached flour-sacking, with a small comforter of tufted yellow silk. "I made this from an old gown Miss Luisa gave me," April explained. "Didn't have no need for it, myself. I know it looks some strange, having it all fixed up so soon, but it comforts me."

Encouraged by Arielle's interest, the woman opened a small chest. Here were squares of flannel, folded and ready, tiny dresses of bleached cotton, crocheted bootees, a delicate knit shawl.

"They're lovely," Arielle burst out. "Oh, April, I envy you!"

The other girl flushed with pleasure at the sincerity in Arielle's voice. "I wasn't sure you'd be interested," she confessed, "but somethin's troublin' Jim. Sometimes he gets right temperish, and there's no tellin' what he'll say or do. I figgered it was best to leave the men to their talkin'."

"I'm glad we did. Oh, April, may I visit again? I've enjoyed this so much—"

"I'd be proud if you did, Ma'am."

"Call me Arielle," she said happily. It was good to have found a friend.

Taking their leave, the newlyweds walked back across the fields. Ramon had remembered some business at the house. Their former comradeship was gone. He walked with long strides and Arielle had to hurry to keep pace with him. It was going to be difficult to cope with his periods of dark moodiness.

As they neared the house, Mindy and Coaley came running to meet them, Mindy full of chatter about the excitement of the wedding. Ramon excused himself and continued on his way. When Arielle tried to follow him, Mindy giggled and said, "Wait, Arie. Coaley, show Arie what you can do—"

The little Negro boy promptly stood on his head, baggy pants sliding down his thin shanks, bare feet trembling with tension. He looked upward for approval, white eyes rolling comically as he strove to keep his balance.

"Wonderful," Arielle said admiringly. Whereupon Mindy tried to emulate him. It was more like a somersault, petticoats and pantalettes exposed.

"I can't do it right," she said sadly, getting to her feet.

Arielle bit her lip to avoid laughing. "There are some things, Mindy, that ladies must leave to the men."

Coaley's chest expanded. Mindy looked downcast. Then she tapped him on the shoulder and sprang away. "I can run faster than you," she sang. "You can't catch me!"

Smiling, Arielle entered the house. Once inside,

she could hear an argument taking place in a small room his mother used as an office.

"Dammit," Ramon was shouting, "I won't have this!"

"The slave is my property, Ramon, and she deserved punishment."

"But I am not your property. And I can walk out on your whole damn plot. Then where will it be?"

Madam Villeré sighed. "I'll have her taken from the fields, Ramon. I will not have her in the house—and you know why. But she will return to the laundry."

Seeing Arielle in the doorway, her mother-in-law smiled wearily. "Come in, my dear. You have just discovered one of your husband's virtues—or faults, as it may be. He persists in regarding the nigras as people. With such an attitude, the plantation would fall into ruin. I pray you will be a stabilizing influence—when I am gone."

With an incoherent sound, Ramon strode from the room. Embarrassed for Madam Villeré, Arielle strove to change the subject.

"We have been to visit the Davises. They seem very nice—"

The older woman's eyes narrowed. So that was where Ramon received his information! Knowing Ramon would be at the plantation for only a few days, she'd assumed he would be taken up with his young wife. Instead, the first person he'd met had informed him of the Negro girl's exile.

"They may be nice," Madam Villeré said, "but I am not certain the man is competent. As soon as I find a replacement, he will be sent on his way."

Troubled, Arielle excused herself and went to her room. Her mother-in-law had seemed angry

with the Davises. Was it something she had said? She hoped a replacement would not be found. April was so proud of her little house, her husband, and the coming child. It would be a terrible thing for her to have to leave.

The remaining days of Ramon's stay passed pleasantly enough. They often visited the Davises. Arielle had begun making a present for April's baby-to-be, a little dress of fine lawn, with dainty tucks and white-on-white embroidery.

Often, she and Ramon would make their excuses to retire early, to the knowing look of Madam Villeré, and the contemptuous stare of Luisa, who had been sullen since the wedding.

They would sit in the small sitting room upstairs, conversing while Arielle sewed. These were pleasant, companionable evenings. Perhaps, Arielle thought, this was enough to build a marriage on.

She asked questions, learning about Coaley. His mother had died when he was about two, and Madam Villeré had given him to Luisa, who had a fondness for children. Now he was banished to the slave quarters, but only ran small errands and was treated as a pet.

Another question had been haunting Arielle for some time. She hadn't known how to ask it, since the events in the garden on her wedding night must never be discovered. "I heard somewhere that you had a brother," she said carefully.

He had been leaning back in his chair. It came forward with a crash. "Those damn niggers have been gossiping again," he said angrily. "Who told you? Blanche? Shug?"

"I said I only heard it," Arielle said angrily. "I don't know where! It might have been something your mother said—or Luisa!"

"Mama wouldn't—and Luisa wouldn't dare," he said irritably. "All right, I might as well tell you. My stepfather, old Villeré, had a son by his first wife. He's about my age, and as boys we disliked each other. When we were seventeen, we had a fight. He nearly killed me. Then he ran off and joined up with Laffite for a while."

Dear God! One of Laffite's murderers! And he had kissed her!

"Old Villeré disinherited him, leaving his property to me, through my mother. No one on the plantation is allowed to mention his name."

She dared ask no more questions. Soon Ramon went to his bed, she to hers.

The last night of his stay, she was unable to sleep. Sometime near morning, she heard a door open and shut. Rising, she went to Ramon's room. His bed was empty. He had probably gone for a walk in the darkness, knowing he must leave his beloved home in the morning.

Next morning, he wished to be awakened early, in order to be on his way. Arielle entered his room, touching his shoulder with gentle fingers. As he struggled to wake, she saw his face was marred with a series of long scratches.

Had it been another man, she thought wryly, she would have thought the gouges were made by a woman's clawing nails. Most probably he'd stumbled into some shrubbery in the dark. And that was the story he told her when, dressed, he let her tend the wounds.

With an instinct for the romantic, Madam Villeré had decided to let the young couple say their farewells alone. Blanche had prepared a breakfast, kept warm under a silver cloth.

Sitting across from Ramon, Arielle felt a pang.

It seemed such a *married* scene, this breakfast alone in the dawn. At this moment, it was also being enacted in the Davis home, where Jim would be looking at his pregnant April with love.

"I must go," Ramon said, taking a last sip of thick sweet coffee. Arielle followed him to the door, a flicker just around the bend in the staircase catching her eye. Throwing her arms around Ramon, she put her lips close to his ear. "Your mother is watching," she hissed.

He clutched her involuntarily, and she pressed her mouth to his. "Goodbye, love," she said. "Oh, please come home soon—"

Then he was gone. Arielle turned away, knowing the act had pleased her spying mother-in-law. Ruefully, she touched her lips. She had been wondering if, pressed in her husband's embrace, his lips against hers, the feelings the intruder in the garden had excited would repeat themselves.

And they had not. She felt nothing.

She tossed her head. If she had to make a choice between Ramon's unnatural behavior and the passion aroused by a murderer's kiss, she'd settle for Ramon, anytime.

She would settle for their relationship, even though they would never be more to each other than kissing-friends.

## Chapter 12

The days after Ramon's departure were hot and heavy, burning under a relentless sun that set the bayous steaming. Madam Villeré, exhausted by her exertions during the month of preparation for the wedding, enervated by the heat, took to her bed. Luisa hovered over her constantly. It was sad the way the rebellious girl sought one word of approval from the sick woman. Blanche, too, remained at her mistress's side, constantly waving a pleated fan and muttering dire predictions.

There was yellow jack at the Cortez plantation. The black vomit. And now her Missus was ailin'. Oh, Lawdy, they was all gonna die! She persisted in spite of Madam Villeré's insistence that she was not sick, just tired. She didn't mention the slight twinge of pain in her chest. After all, she had lived with it for some time.



Mindy and Coaley didn't feel the heat. They ran in the sun like playful puppies, Mindy's bonnet hanging by its strings. She was brown as a berry, her blond hair bleached almost white, and a scattering of freckles adorned her impish nose.

Arielle, too, managed to get out of the house often. Free from the watchfulness of her mother-in-law, she visited with the Davises, sometimes sitting and sewing with April, other times, walking the fields with Jim Davis, learning about the plantation.

The main crop was sugar. Seed cane was planted in shallow furrows six feet apart. New plants came from each joint of the cane. Corn was usually planted between the rows, and the slaves hoed the crops all spring and early summer.

"Right now," Jim said in his slow drawl, "the crop's 'laid by.' That means it's tall enough and strong enough to take care of itself. The slaves are set to other work, clearing ground, cutting wood for the winter—"

"In this heat?" Arielle was incredulous. "How do they stand it?"

"You get used to what you got to do," he said honestly.

They walked on to the sugar mill as he described the coming harvest. The slaves would cut the cane with a knife—like a machete with a hook at the end. Blades were stripped from the stalk, the top severed, another cut at the ground level. Then the stalks were loaded on carts bound for the sugar house. At the mill they were fed into a press formed by iron cylinders that squeezed the juice; the residue, called bagasse, was used for fuel in the slave quarters.

The juice was then boiled, brown sugar finally

crystallizing; the remainder was thick, dark molasses. No point in going into much detail. She would see it for herself, come late fall.

Arielle's mind had been far from the making of sugar. "When is April's baby due?"

"Mebbe November."

"I'd like to be with her, if I may. I don't know much about such things, but—"

There were tears in the lanky man's eyes. "She'd like that." Then, "What the hell?"

A shirtless slave was running toward them, eyes wild in his black face. "You best come quick, Boss. Big George jus' beat the debbil outen Mose. Think mebbe he kilt him—"

"Sonofabitch!" Davis swore. "I'll have his hide for that! I'll whup him 'til he ain't got enough skin to hold him together."

He turned a stern face to Arielle. "Trouble, Ma'am. You best get back to the house."

Returning, Arielle was still pondering over the vicious transformation in Jim Davis' character. One minute, he displayed tender emotions. The next, he looked like a killer. She thought of April's words: *Jim's temperish. No tellin' what he'll say or do.*

She shivered a little, despite the heat, as she prayed that reports of the fight among the slaves had been exaggerated.

Her feet slowed as she passed the slave quarters. Before Ramon returned to New Orleans, she'd noted that Bathilde was gone, the other girl back at her tubs. Now she was busily spreading sheets over nearby shrubs. With a shock, Arielle saw that she was almost white. And as the girl straightened, putting a hand to her back, she could see she was heavy with child.

She had a notion this was the girl who'd been

working in the fields. But in her condition even this work was too much for her. Arielle sought vainly for an excuse to speak to her, and then it came.

A freak gust of hot wind ripped through the stillness of the simmering sky. Sheets and tablecloths became kites, swirling with it. The laundress grabbed frantically to save her wash, and Arielle ran to help her.

At last the errant laundry was gathered. The two girls faced each other, their arms full. Arielle saw a honey-colored face, its fine-boned thinness streaked with perspiration below a faded tignon. But the eyes held her. Golden, gleaming with feral hatred, like those of some jungle beast, they forced Arielle into taking an involuntary step backward.

Without a word, the girl turned and went into her house, slamming the door. Arielle stood, red-faced, her arms full of laundry. Finally, she saw a plank table against an outside wall. She set her burden down with a resounding thump. There! Let her find it!

The laundress did not leave Arielle's mind, however. It was clear she was near her time. She should not be committed to such heavy labor. And perhaps she herself was at fault. In moving in to aid the girl, she may have broken some unspoken law peculiar to this area.

She decided to speak to her mother-in-law on the girl's behalf. Perhaps she could be given light tasks in the house, until the baby came.

Madam Villeré was not sympathetic to the girl's plight. She explained her background. Cleone was part white. Her mother had got herself mixed up with a white man—which made the worst kind of nigger, uppity, arrogant, disobedient. But because

she was Ned's granddaughter, she'd grown up in the house, a special pet of the deceased Monsieur Villeré. She herself had disapproved. And sure enough, the girl had got herself pregnant by a—a visiting relative of the family. A little suffering might improve her moral character.

That night Arielle watched from her window. Cleone laid a fire beneath the black iron pot for the morning. Then, watching her carry pail after pail of water from the cistern for the cold rinse tubs, bent beneath their weight, Arielle suffered for her. She put a hand to her own back in sympathy. If there were only something she could do. But she had no authority—

It was a miserable night. Arielle twisted and turned in her sodden sheets. Outside the netting, mosquitoes kept up their high, concerted whine. Blanche, fearing the Black Vomit, had burned several sulphur candles against its invasion. Arielle's nostrils burned with the acrid smell. When she slept at last, it was to dream she was standing over a boiling pot of laundry, the lye-scented steam rising around her until she couldn't breathe. She was stirring it with a stick of cane that kept turning into sugar and breaking. And behind her stood Jim Davis with a whip, saying, "I'll whup you to death for that."

When she woke, it was gray dawn. She put her hand to the window. It was far cooler outside than in. She had a burning need to escape the house, the slave quarters, the Davises—everyone. Her head throbbed from the night's misery. She wanted to be alone.

She dressed and went down to the stables where a sleepy stableboy, protesting a bit, saddled a

horse for her. Ole Missus hadn't tole him to do this. He didn't want no trouble. But when Arielle ceased asking and resorted to her mother-in-law's imperious tone, he hastened to comply.

Pleased at her triumph, feeling almost drunk with freedom, Arielle guided the horse into the dim morning. Her only experience at riding had been an old plow horse on her aunt's farm, but she was confident. When the animal she was riding stopped, trembling a little, she stroked it soothingly. In a moment, she saw the source of the trouble: A mother possum, her small ones clinging to her, waddling heavily across the path.

It was thrilling to be out in the morning world. She began to watch for animals, seeing swamp rabbits, fox squirrel—and once, two widely set red eyes gleaming from the vine-jungle that edged the bayou. She hastened her mount's steps, then forgot the incident at the sight of a snowy egret against dark vegetation. The sun began to rise, painting the misty sky with water-color tints of rose.

She was halfway around the circular island, the house no longer in sight, when she saw the bridge. It was an arched wooden facsimile of the bridge at the Villeré approach. She recalled Mindy's tale of a fairy-tale house hidden in the swamp. As she remembered, the child had said something about Luisa having to check first, to be certain no one was there—

Well, what could the owner do, other than order her off his land?

She crossed the bridge, wishing, a little nervously, that the horse's hooves didn't make such a hollow, ringing sound. A narrow trail led through swamp growth, pressing so closely that at times she was forced to duck to prevent entangling her long

hair. A last turn in the trail, and the house lay before her. She caught her breath. Long and low, of pinkish tabby stucco, roofed with tiles of a deeper rose, the house caught the colors of the morning. Seeming built to no particular pattern, it meandered comfortably in ells and nooks. On her side was a walled garden, a willow trailing lacy fingers over the wall, flowering vines tumbling riotously along the top, spilling downward in nosegays. An archway held a blue, half-door, that seemed to swing open in welcome.

How beautiful! No wonder Mindy was so thrilled!

She was so absorbed in the scene that she didn't feel the quivering of the high-spirited horse beneath her. Suddenly, with a sound almost like a scream, it lunged upward, throwing her heavily into the dirt of the trail. Then it whirled, its hooves barely missing her head, and galloped back toward the plantation.

Stunned, Arielle moaned as she tried to gather her senses. Then a man's voice rang out. "Dammit, don't move!"

Her blurred vision cleared enough that she could see a gun pointed at her. She screamed as it exploded. Then, amazed to find herself alive, looked dazedly at where the shot had struck.

A snake, larger than her arm, lay writhing in the grass. Its head hung limply, its mouth opened to bare its puffed-cotton interior. But the rest of the reptile was very much alive. Its lashing tail caught her arm.

For the first time in her life, Arielle fainted.

When she woke, she was lying on a garden bench. A man stood above her, dressed in black trousers and a white silk shirt that opened to the waist, revealing a brown, muscular chest. Her eyes

moved up. Dark hair tumbled over a tanned forehead. The face that looked down at her was filled with compassion, the eyes with concern. But she recognized him, even though she'd never seen him in the light.

It was Ramon's enemy, the buccaneer, the brother without a name. It was the man who had sent her pulses throbbing—with one kiss.

## Chapter 13

Arielle closed her eyes again, feigning unconsciousness while she tried to figure out what to do. Bruised and battered from her fall, she knew she'd find it hard to run. And if she could run, he would undoubtedly catch up to her long before she reached the Villeré house.

She felt his warm fingers touching her face, sliding along her throat, leaving trails of fire in their wake. Then he unbuttoned the top button of her gown, began to slide it from her shoulder.

She sat up, painfully. "Keep your hands off me," she said hoarsely. "I didn't tell Ramon before, but this time—"

The man's dark brows lifted, his eyes dancing with sardonic mischief. "I'm glad you spoke, my dear. You've saved yourself from certain humili-



tion. I was merely searching for fang marks, fearing I didn't shoot soon enough."

"I must thank you for saving my life," she said formally, her face crimson at being placed in such an idiotic position. "Now, I will go."

She started to stand, moaning at the pain in her ribs. Her ankle refused to support her, and she crumpled against him. He helped her, protesting, into his house.

"We must get your things off and see if there are any bones broken," he said, depositing her on a sofa. He left her, and walked toward the rear of the house. "First a spot of brandy to alleviate the shock—"

Arielle looked about wildly and reached for a black iron candleholder. Gripping it, she waited fiercely for his return.

Instead, an ancient Negress shuffled in. She stopped, her mouth open. "I'm s'posed to look you over, Missie! See if you's hurt any. But not if you plannin' to whop me over the haid. Put that thing down!"

Feeling foolish, Arielle obeyed.

The woman's hands were surprisingly gentle. "You bruised up some. Nuthin' bust. I get you a pail of water to soak that foot."

Arielle was sitting up, foot in a pail, when the master of the house returned. He pushed a small tea cart. "Now, maybe that you've found I'm not such an ogre, you'll accept a cup of tea. Old Cinnie says you'll have to soak your foot for at least an hour. So we might try to be friends. Perhaps we should pretend we never met. I'm Mr. Smith. And you, I believe, are Miss Jones?"

He made such a comical face that she couldn't

keep from smiling. "Tea, Miss Jones?" He poured a dollop of brandy in it, and she sipped at the hot liquid, feeling its warmth seep through her.

"I'm sorry I frightened you when I shot the snake," he said, unexpectedly. "And I'm sorry I—did what I did the night of your wedding."

"Why did you do it then?" Her words were flat and hard with remembered anger.

"A boorish and childish reaction. Villeré-in-the-Swamp was once my home. When my mother was alive, it was a warm and friendly place. Now I am excluded. When I was a child, there were parties, festivities. Your wedding was the first in a long time. Think of me as a child, standing outside a window, when everything is festive and happy inside. The child would want to break a window—"

"You paint a very sympathetic picture of yourself," she said angrily. "Was it a child who nearly killed Ramon? Who ran away to join a den of thieves and murderers?"

He sighed, theatrically. "Too late with my defense! As for your beloved husband, I only broke his arm. Now I wish it had been his neck. As for Laffite, to whom I'm certain you refer, he is a gentleman. True, he preys on his enemies. But the people of New Orleans profit. Without his duty-free goods, they would be living in poverty."

"He was responsible for the death of my mother. His men rammed the *Rachel*—"

He nodded. "I know of the *Rachel* incident. Laffite's ship was commanded by one of his lieutenants. There was a royal to-do about it. And the man was relieved of his command."

"What about Madam Villeré's first husband? Ramon's father? He was killed by a privateer—"

"Laffite was a child then, since he's little older than I. Is he still under suspicion?" He leaned forward, his hands about his cup as if to warm them as he stared into its depths. "Madam Villeré. I have heard her stories until I can recite them by heart. Her esteemed Estavan, of royal lineage. Her relationship to a member of Count Alexander O'Reilly's memorable staff—"

"There is nothing wrong with being proud of one's honorable ancestors," Arielle said sharply.

"Indeed not. In fact, I am exceedingly proud of one of mine. He joined with a gentleman named Lafrénière, in seeking liberty for this area. When O'Reilly took over, he ostensibly gave them amnesty. Then he summoned twelve leaders to his home for a routine conference. Nine came. They were arrested. Of the twelve, six were hanged. The others were imprisoned—all except my ancestor."

"Then you have no complaint."

"You haven't heard the end of my story. He was taken aboard a frigate. His wife learned of his whereabouts, and his slaves rowed her out to see him. She begged, but permission was denied. He heard her voice—"

Arielle felt herself shivering as he paused. Then he went on.

"He heard her voice and struggled to reach her. He was bayoneted in her view by his guards."

Her mouth was dry. There was nothing she could say.

"Suppose we change the subject. It does not suit itself to a social occasion." He filled her cup once more. "Do you like my home?"

"It's very attractive." She sought wildly for another topic. "It's very cool here. I see you do not

burn fires in summer. How do you keep out the damp?"

"It is simple. Hidden in every nook and cranny are pails of lime. It draws the moisture from the air. It is the most expedient method, since I am seldom here."

"But surely, Cinnie—"

"Cinnie is rarely here. She is not a slave, but a free woman. I managed to buy her, through another party, and gave her her freedom."

"The property," she blurted, "did you also buy that through another party?"

He threw back his head, laughing, and she marveled at the line of his brown throat. "You have an insatiable curiosity, Miss Jones! Tell you what, I'll ask myself the questions and answer them for you."

"First question: How does a disinherited son acquire property adjacent to his rightful inheritance? Answer: This was my mother's home. It was deeded to me at birth, according to the terms of her father's will. My stepmother cannot touch it, or at least she was so informed in a court of law."

"You mean she tried—?"

He nodded, his face grim. "A very avaricious lady, my stepmother. Queen of all she surveys. And there's the Crown Prince, Ramon. But it's the female of the species that's deadly—"

"I've heard enough," Arielle said sharply. "I will not have my family criticized!"

"Of course not. Not when you're doing so well for yourself." His eyes went to the sapphires at her throat. "And, too, you may be the bearer of the heir apparent—" His brows shot up. "Good Lord, I didn't think. That fall—you're not—"

A blush spread over her face, staining her throat, and she averted her eyes from his.

He chuckled. "No, I take it, is the answer. I might have known. At least I think more of Brother Ramon now—"

What did he mean by that inscrutable remark? Had he guessed at her arrangement with Ramon? Did he know Ramon wasn't a real man—in that sense? Dear God, had her guilty blush given her secret away? Her embarrassment gave way before a simmering anger that blanked out his conversation.

"I'm sorry I spoke as I did earlier," he said in a contrite voice. "I shouldn't force my opinions on a captive audience. To return to our earlier topic, I love my home. I haven't developed it as a plantation because I don't believe in slavery. When peace is certain, I have plans for developing the property. At this time, I have other interests—"

"Such as *piracy*?"

He set his cup down. "My dear young lady! You make light conversation most difficult. So, since you must remain here for some time on Cinnie's orders, I will leave you to your own devices. Now, if you will excuse me—"

He left the room. In a few minutes, she saw him through the French doors that led to the garden. It was not a formal garden, as was the one at Villeré-in-the-Swamp, but a riot of bloom allowed to run free. Still, there was much to do to keep the swamp growth from encroaching. He hoed and pruned diligently, and Arielle was conscious of the way his thin shirt clung to his hard-muscled shoulders. She found herself daydreaming. This was her house, her husband. In a few moments, he would come in—

A little moan escaped her lips and she opened her eyes. He was standing over her.

"Are you in pain?" He asked, a worried frown between his brows.

"I was dreaming," she offered feebly. "The snake. I suppose it was a nightmare."

He dropped to his knees and took her foot in tender fingers, probing her swollen ankle. "I think you can manage now," he said. "You should get home as soon as possible, or they will be looking for you. I will give you a horse and escort you part of the way."

She fought against the reaction his touch induced, emotion making her voice tart. "Only part of the way?"

He stood and looked down at her soberly. "I have been denied access to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Madam Villeré has given her slaves orders to shoot me on sight. I do not imagine your presence will afford me any protection. But if you wish—"

She stared at him. It was a lie! Her kindly mother-in-law would order no such thing! Then, why was she afraid to put it to the test?

"I can find my own way home."

"I will take you most of the way."

He left the room. Arielle sank back, filled with chaotic thoughts. She hated him. But there was a current between them that pulled her into a whirlpool of illicit feeling. She'd wanted to lean her hot cheek against his brown chest—

She put the thought from her. But her heart stumbled and stopped at the sound of approaching footsteps. It was only old Cinnie, to dry her small foot and lace it into her protective boot once more.

"That boy sure itchin' to get you out of this house," the woman grumbled. "Ain't like Mistuh Andre. You oughtta spend the night, hurt like 'you is."

Andre. So that was his name. "I'm afraid I am the one who insists upon going," she said coolly. "I have no wish to accept his hospitality."

The Negress sat back on her heels and looked up. "You two sho' do rub each other the wrong way—"

"I have no ill feelings toward him." Arielle's voice was lofty. "It is my husband he hates."

"I wouldn't say that," Andre Villeré drawled. He seemed to have appeared suddenly from the shadows. "Hate is a strong word. Perhaps it would be better to say I do not respect him."

Arielle pulled her skirt down hastily to cover her ankle, then rose, painfully. "Thank you, Cinnie. The boot seems to help. Now that I can walk, I will go."

Andre did not touch her, but watched her hobble from the house. She stared for a moment at the horses. She would never be able to mount. And she would not ask for help.

With a low laugh, Andre boosted her into the saddle like a bag of laundry. Then, mounting his own horse, he moved out ahead, with no thought to her condition. Unaccustomed as she was to a man's saddle, she hooked one knee around the saddle-horn, adjusting her skirts to cover her action, and lifted the reins. Though the horse was smooth-gaited, every step was agony for her.

They moved out of the green shade as they crossed the bridge. The morning sun was already molten in a simmering day, and black spots danced before Arielle's eyes. It was sometime before she could take note of their route. A small trail led through the cane; it was hard-packed, as if it were often used. She wondered if he were the one who

made it. Did he make a practice of peeping through the plantation's windows?

She wanted to be rid of him! She thought of calling out for help. But no one would hear her—not now, with the cane having been “laid by.”

It was so hot. She licked her dry lips, thinking of the cool house she'd just left. If only she could have a sip of water—

Ahead of her, Andre reined in his horse. They had reached the end of the cane field. No longer would they have a protective shield. “I can go no farther,” he said. “From here, you must manage alone. You must think of something to explain your mount, if you are seen. I do not think Madam Villeré will take kindly to your having visited me.”

“I did not visit you,” she flared. “I did not know you lived there! And take your horse! I intend to walk from here!”

With a shrug, he dismounted. She ignored the hands he reached to her, and slid to the ground. He caught her, and she leaned weakly against him, feeling the warmth of his body against her own, her cheek against his thudding heart. She began to tremble—or was it he? She raised her face in wonder to find his own close. The hard mouth had softened, the dark eyes were hot and deep with feeling.

She swayed for a moment, closing her eyes, and felt his mouth touch hers—this time with an excruciating tenderness that melted her very being. She felt her own lips part, her body press against his in a need she couldn't suppress.

Then he set her away from him. “Well, Miss Jones! It would seem we must part. But I wish to make something plain. You are not to come to my



home again—or near it. You are most definitely not welcome. This has been a pleasant interlude, but I do not wish to see you again.”

She backed from the man who had suddenly become menacing, his dark eyes slitted. Still dazed from her tumultuous emotions, she whispered, “Why did you kiss me?”

“Because you wanted me to.”

He laughed and mounted his horse with a single movement. Catching the reins of the other animal, he disappeared into the cane.

Arielle’s emotions settled into a state of cold fury. It sustained her as she hobbled toward the house. When it was in sight, she fell. Setting her teeth, she managed to get to her feet and stagger a little farther. She fell again. Dear God, why didn’t someone see her?

At Villeré-in-the-Swamp, a messenger had arrived. The letter he carried was for Madam Villeré from her son. He didn’t know the content, for he could neither read nor write. But he did know the value of money. And he had been paid to bring the message first to Cleone.

Inside her dim cabin, she copied certain parts of the message, then refolded it carefully, giving it back to the messenger. Then she stepped outside with him. It was she who saw the limping figure in the distance, she who saw Arielle fall.

Running, despite the burden of her unborn baby, she reached Arielle and helped her to her feet. Together, she and the messenger managed to get the injured girl to the back door and into the house. They left before she even had a chance to thank them.

The turmoil brought Madam Villeré from her sickbed. “Child! What happened?”

"I was riding. I fell."

The older woman herself insisted upon tending Arielle. She bathed the girl's hot face, exclaiming over her bruises. Her features, haggard with worry, looked worn and old. This was the woman Andre Villeré maligned, Arielle thought. The things he said about her could not be true!

"The stableboy should have known better than to let you go alone," Madam Villeré said, distractedly. "I shall have him whipped! I will give orders that you are not to ride—"

Arielle sat up. "I will ride," she blazed. "There are some areas where I must make my own decisions. I am not a child!"

The older woman faltered. "Of course, my dear. But you see what happened."

"It will not happen again." Arielle lay down and turned her face to the wall. "I will not—be careless."

## Chapter 14

Within a few days, Arielle's hurts had healed. But with her mother-in-law's solicitous hovering, she felt virtually a prisoner. The heat had still not broken. Flies, obscenely fat and sluggish, droned against the windowpane. Arielle sighed. She felt trapped and lonely. Mindy had been in constant attendance for a while, but as Arielle improved and the novelty of the injury wore off, the child was off to her own pursuits.

Most of the time there was nothing to do but watch the girl, Cleone, from the window. Arielle wondered how it would feel, carrying a baby, not having a husband. How had it happened? Had the Marquez relative forced himself upon her? Or had he held her against him, kissed her—until she had not been able to resist him? It could have happened that way—

She was angry at herself as she realized she was making comparisons; envisioning herself as she slid off the tall horse into Andre's arms; remembering the intensity of her emotions. It must have been the heat, she thought angrily. Her injuries. A moment of temporary insanity. How could she have felt toward him as she did!

She crimsoned as she remembered how he set her away, telling her not to set foot in his house again. As if she cared to! And that last cruel remark—he had kissed her because she wanted him to! If he ever touched her again, she'd kill him!

But, she thought forlornly, she'd never see him again. Her gaze went back toward the laundry. Poor Cleone.

While she watched, a man had approached the girl where she stood at the laundry tubs. Arielle recognized him. He was the black man who had been with Cleone the day she came to Arielle's aid. As she watched, the girl dried her soapy hands on her apron and they went into the house. They were in there for a long time.

Could Madam Villeré be wrong? Perhaps Cleone had taken up with one of her own kind. If a black man were the father of the baby, would her mother-in-law relent? She would watch for a day or two—

The man came out and walked toward the back door. It would be another message from Ramon. Arielle sighed. The messages were never shared. Perhaps Ramon was coming home. She hoped so. He might not be a husband to her, but he was a friend. And when he was here, it was easier to curtail her wayward thoughts—

On impulse, she decided to walk to the Davises.

April was delighted to see her. During these last days, as her bruises healed, Arielle had completed her gift, the baby garment. The overseer's wife accepted it with tears of gratitude. It was a pleasant morning until Jim came in. He was his old, gentle, awkward self, but Arielle, remembering the way his anger had once flared, his threats to whip Big George, felt uncomfortable in his presence. She took her leave and walked, disconsolately, home.

The Allinghams called in the afternoon. The buzzing conversation, mingled with the sound of droning flies, made Arielle's head hurt. Such dull and stuffy people. Yet Madam Villeré seemed intent on marrying Luisa to Edward. Surely there were other eligible men. Imagine, sitting between brother and sister, sentenced to their interminable chatting forever. And they even smelled dusty.

Edward addressed Luisa, his protuberant eyes adoring. He swallowed, ducking his head out and in. Arielle fought a desire to laugh. He had worse features. In fact, he was sitting on one.

Fortunately—and unfortunately—Mindy and Coaley brought the visit to an end. Somehow, in their roaming, they'd decided to probe the inside of a hollow log and in doing so they'd aroused the anger of a skunk. This time, there were not the usual effusive farewells. When the two children appeared in the doorway, the Allinghams gasped a farewell and fled. As their carriage rattled down the drive, Elizabeth was searching frantically in her reticule for her smelling salts.

Arielle, preparing for bed, could laugh at the incident now. Poor Mindy, clothing burned, skin scrubbed pink, had been banished to the sewing room for the night. Coaley was equally unpopular, ordered to bed down in the woodshed. Except for

the discomfort of the children, it had been a highly satisfactory occasion.

Smiling, she wandered to the window. The weather had broken. A cool mist of rain was falling. The lyrical notes of the tree frogs along the wooded bayou made a small, incessant music. It was punctuated at intervals with the bass notes of the bullfrogs in the swamp.

A movement caught her eye. The door to Cleone's cabin stood open, and she was speaking with someone—a man. He put his arm around her, and for a moment, her head rested on his shoulder. They moved into the cabin, and he turned to shut the door. For a brief instant, Arielle saw his face.

*Andre Villeré.*

Sick with shock, Arielle shut the window as if it would erase the scene. Then she hurried to the bed, crawling in behind the netting, as if it, too, would hide what she'd viewed, *A visiting relative*. She should have guessed. And the girl had grown up with that—that monster! Arielle shut her eyes, trying to reconstruct the past. Cleone was probably the reason the brothers had fought. Perhaps Ramon had come upon them together. The shock might have had something to do with his present attitude toward love—

No wonder Andre Villeré had been disinherited. No wonder he had run away. But he had come back—and Cleone's condition was evidence of that.

She could not blame Cleone—not when she herself—. Arielle put her hand over her mouth. Dear God, how could she still think of him in a romantic way!

Was he still lusting after the girl in her present condition? She thought of the trail through the cane—the well-used trail. What were they doing out there?

In the dim cabin, Cleone moved from Andre's consoling arms. "I will be all right now," she whispered, wiping at her tears. "It's my condition, I think. Sometimes I start remembering and—well, it's hard." She knelt beside her pallet, drawing several papers from the small hidey-hole she'd created there.

"Here are the last two messages. There isn't much. The British are talking of invading Ohio; planning to incite the Creeks in Georgia and Alabama to go on the warpath. They're treating with Tecumseh."

"Good God," Andre whispered.

"There's a great deal about the blockade farther north. A list of Claiborne's resources to be given to Allingham. Several maps—"

"You've done well, little sister," Andre said softly.

"I may not be much help within the next few days," she said ruefully. "You will have to continue coming here, since I cannot come to you."

He patted her shoulder with affection. "There is no need. Some of Laffite's men are meeting at my house tonight. These papers will go directly into his hands. And we are setting up a rendezvous. I will meet them at a designated place and arrange for a boatload of arms and ammunition. At least, we will be able to put up a good fight."

"Do you think Claiborne will ever settle for Laffite's help?"

"I think he will have to. Now, take care of yourself, little sister." He kissed her, and was gone into the night.

When Arielle forced herself to return to the window, the light that glimmered from the small

cabin had been extinguished, and the door was closed. Drearily, she returned to bed.

When she arose the next morning, she had come to a decision. She dressed, went downstairs, and faced her mother-in-law.

The older woman flinched when Arielle informed her she knew who was the father of Cleone's child. She had seen him with her, the previous night, sneaking into her cabin.

Madam Villeré seemed astounded. "It cannot be. You must be mistaken, child—"

"I saw him! It was Andre Villeré. I saw him plainly. I—I have met him, before," she added lamely. "He put his arms around her, and they went in. It isn't fair, Mother Villeré! He lives in luxury, while she is a slave! You must make him face up to his responsibilities."

"I have never," the woman said grimly, "been able to control my stepson in anything."

"Then free Cleone. Perhaps he'll take her in. At least acknowledge his child! She's out there now, scrubbing clothes, when she should be—"

Madam Villeré raised a silencing hand. "Perhaps you're right. Let me think on this a while. In the meantime, you do not look well. I don't want you making yourself ill over this."

"It's just from being cooped up in the house," Arielle faltered.

"You need fresh air," the woman mused. "I hear there is illness at Beká. Perhaps you would accompany Ned to deliver a basket for me, along with my good wishes?"

Arielle's face brightened, and she hugged her mother-in-law impulsively. It was decided that Mindy, too, should go. It would be wonderful, an outing away from Villeré-in-the Swamp, away from



all her concerns—and the feelings that troubled her. She ran to tell Mindy, and to dress for the occasion.

Madam Villeré watched her go, and pulled at her lower lip. So it had been Cleone who was responsible for the leak in information. And all the time, she'd suspected Luisa—not that the girl wasn't capable of it. Her eyes narrowed. She would take care of the little bitch.

Ned entered to remove her plate. She instructed him to have Cook pack a basket of jams, jellies, and small cakes; anything to tempt the appetite of someone ill. Then he was to drive to Beká with Miss Arielle who was paying a sick call.

Ned could not demur, though he dreaded the journey. He'd grown old in the Villeré service, and his age was catching up with him. It was a mizzly day, and his rheumaticks were acting up mighty bad—

Madam Villeré saw them off and returned to the house. As she heard the carriage rolling over the bridge, she reached up to take a whip down from the kitchen wall. Stepping outside, she lashed at a shrub a few times to limber her wrist. Then, recoiling the thing, she walked toward the laundry with measured tread.

\* \* \*

The visit at Beká was very pleasant, the family of General Villeré welcoming Arielle warmly. Contrary to her mother-in-law's belief, no one was ill, but her gift of foods was accepted graciously. She was given a tour of the house and grounds and was astounded at the magnitude of the plantation and the fact that it was self-sufficient in every way.

"You should see Versailles," young Major Gabri-

el Villeré said. It was the plantation of his friend Pierre Denis de la Ronde who dreamed of founding a city and port on the Mississippi that overshadowed New Orleans. From it would be built a broad highway connected with Lake Borgne—

"A dream that died with this cursed war," a voice said behind them. "So do not give me too much credit."

Pierre Denis de la Ronde had arrived with the de la Croix family. Soon the house was filled with light conversation and laughter. Mindy, who had pouted on the journey because Coaley wasn't included, found plenty of playmates. Despite the drizzle, they ran shrieking and giggling across a green lawn. Mindy had to be dragged away when it was time to return home.

Arielle felt refreshed and rested. She had gained the approval of the Villerés and their guests. And in doing so, she could help her husband. It was evident the military branch thought little of the Spanish woman who married into their family. They didn't know her. And Arielle was certain she could change all that.

What puzzled her was that she'd heard Andre's name brought up several times—with what sounded like respect and affection. She wondered what they'd think if they knew of his affair with Cleone.

As they neared home, the drizzle increased. It was a cold blowing rain by the time they reached Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Ned drew the covered carriage near a door to let the girls out, then took carriage and horses on around to the stables.

Arielle sent Mindy to the room she shared with Luisa and went to her own. There was time for a short rest before dinner. She hadn't been resting

long when her chamber door opened to reveal a woebegone Mindy. "Luisa told me to come in here. She has a headache. She doesn't feel like talking to me."

Wondering at her sister-in-law's odd behavior, Arielle took Mindy into her bed. Soon, the sisters fell asleep in each other's arms.

They both slept heavily. Arielle was exhausted from her lack of sleep the previous night, Mindy from a day at play. Waking, Arielle's heart sank. The time for dinner was surely past. Why had no one called them?

She woke Mindy, and they hurried. The house was oddly silent. They found Luisa and her mother in the kitchen. Both women were pale, and Luisa had been crying. She shifted her gaze and did not meet Arielle's eyes.

"We are fending for ourselves, tonight," Madam Villeré said briskly. There has been a death in the quarters, and I've given the house slaves leave."

"Not—not the fever?" Arielle asked.

Madam Villeré laughed. "Indeed not, child. The season is past. It goes with the rain. No, this death was not unexpected. Ned has lived long past his prime."

Arielle stared at her in disbelief. Only a short time ago, the elderly Negro had sat erect in the driver's seat of the carriage that had brought them home. He had not complained of being ill at any time of the day, and had seemed to enjoy his visit in the kitchen of their host. But to happen so suddenly—

"A stroke," Madam Villeré said, as if reading her mind. "These things often happen. Perhaps it was for the best."

Mindy began to sob, but Arielle was still dazed. "Is—is there anything I can do?"

"Just let it be. The nigras have their own way of dealing with their dead. They'll bury him in the morning."

Madam Villeré put gumbo and cornbread on the table, but no one could eat. Finally, by common consent, they all agreed to go to bed. The mercurial Luisa now decided Mindy must accompany her, and this time Arielle went to her room alone.

Through her open window, she heard a sound of hymn-singing, mingled with a soft wailing. She closed the window, only to see the rain sheet against it in a wash of tears.

Sadly, Arielle turned to her bed. She felt guilty. Sometime today, she should have taken time to look closely at the old man. Surely she would have noticed if he were ill or under stress. Now, it was too late. There was nothing she could do—but let it be.

She tried to sleep, but it was useless. The sleep, earlier, had taken the edge from her fatigue. Rising, she slipped into her robe and lit a candle. Ned's death had made her think of the people at the boardinghouse where she had lived. Most of them were old. Though she hadn't had a letter in answer to her first, she was suddenly afraid to wait. She wanted them to know she loved them and was thinking of them, even in her new life.

She had written a half-page when a tapping sounded at the door to her sitting room. Mindy, she thought. She can't sleep, either. But she opened the door to see Coaley. The little black boy was soaked through, his eyes red with tears. He snuffled, drawing his sleeve across his nose, and looked furtively up and down the hall.

Arielle drew him into her room, kneeling beside him. "Coaley, what is it?"

"Oh, Miss Arielle, you got to come," he blubbered.

"Come where, Coaley?" She thought of Mindy. "Coaley, what's happened?"

It was Cleone, he told her through muffled sobs. Ned died when he saw what happened to her. And now Cleone was dyin'. She wanted to see Miss Arielle bad, but Bathilde was on guard outside the door. Not s'posed to let anybody in. Shug had sent him. She figured Miss Arielle wouldn't tell, and Arielle could talk to Cleone through the back window, the same way she did.

"She say to hurry. Cleone's took bad."

With a muffled exclamation, Arielle turned toward the servants' stair. Then she turned back. "Should I call Madam Villeré? Does she know what's going on?"

Coaley melted into a puddle of fear as he clutched her skirts. "Oh, Miss Arielle, don't say nuthin'. She'll kill us all, 'fore God!"

None of this made sense! She shoved Coaley into her room. "Stay here until I get back. There are towels in the dressing room. Dry yourself off."

Then, lifting the skirts of her flowing robe, she began to run. Outside, the rain cut through her flimsy clothing. She regretted not having paused for a cloak, but ran on. The hard-packed earth around the slave quarters was a sea of mud. She lost both slippers. At least her bare feet didn't make the squashing sound of wet shoes.

It was a good thing, she thought, as she approached Cleone's cabin from the side. She crept to the front corner, peering toward the entrance. Coaley hadn't lied on one count. The sturdy Bathilde

stood four-square to the elements, her arms folded in a positive manner, her black face impassive.

Arielle backed slowly. Only a narrow space separated the structure from the one next to it, where she could hear singing. A woman's rich voice sang, *He got de cane laid by—He got de cane laid by*. Many voices joined in the chorus: *Lawd Jesus tuk his burden awa-a-ay*. Through it all sounded a cadenced sobbing. Arielle's teeth chattered from nerves and cold as she sidled through the opening. Shutters hung crookedly from a glassless window that emitted a soft light.

A molasses keg stood beneath it. Stepping upward, Arielle had a full view of the cabin's interior. A pallet lay directly below and to one side. Arielle drew a shuddering breath. In a tangle of blood-soaked covers, eyes blackened and swelled shut, her face battered beyond recognition, lay Cleone. Beneath the purple bruises, her honey-colored face was an ashen gray. She looked—dead. Then she moaned, her body arching in the throes of a birth-pain.

She had been beaten nearly to death, and her baby was being born.

"Cleone." Arielle's strangled cry was little more than a whisper, but the girl heard. A horrible travesty of a smile twisted her swollen mouth.

"Go to Andre. Tell him they know. Not safe. Not safe—." Her head rolled to one side. She had lapsed into unconsciousness, but the terrible struggle within her body was going on.

Arielle backed away, her mind a turmoil. Had she brought this about through her conversation with her mother-in-law? No! The woman was firm, but not cruel! Still, she hated her stepson—and with reason.

*Tell him they know. Not safe.* The girl's voice rang in her ears. She expected Arielle to carry a warning to the man who had loved her—and left her to be mistreated so.

Well, she damn well would! Her anger raged out of control. She would drag that man from his nice warm house, and she'd tell him what she thought of him! She'd shame him into coming here. Arielle was no match for the burly Bathilde, but he would be. Cleone had to have help, and soon!

Creeping from the aperture, Arielle heard the voices lifted in song. *He got de cane laid by.* They were singing for old Ned. And now she knew what had happened to him. He'd seen that grisly sight upon his return, and the Lord *had* taken his burden away.

Leaving Cleone's cabin, Arielle ran through the shadows to reach the stable. Except for the horses, it was empty. The stableboy was evidently among Ned's mourners. She looked around. The only saddled horse was the one she had ridden previously, the one that had thrown her. There was no time to saddle another. Hastily fitting a bridle to the animal, Arielle flung herself onto its back.

Big George, mourning old Ned in his own fashion, with a pilfered bottle, heard the thunder of devil hooves—and saw what appeared to be an apparition flashing by.

He tossed the bottle into the bayou, and returned to the quarters where he joined the hymn-sing, sitting well to the back of the room.

## Chapter 15

Arielle thundered across the wooden arched bridge and, head down, urged the horse into the narrow trail. Suddenly it stopped, dancing a little, either remembering the snake or scenting its dead remains. Ruthlessly, Arielle drove her knees into its side. Snorting, sidestepping, it moved on.

The house was dark. Arielle's fists at the locked front door brought no reply. No wonder, in this rain and wind. But she began to be afraid. What if he had already gone?

She walked around to the walled garden. The half-door stood open, invitingly. The French windows, wide open when she'd last seen them, were now heavily draped. One stood a bit ajar, and she pushed it open. She would drag him from his bed, if she must.



He was not abed. When she stepped into the room, she saw him at a small table. A single candle burned, and he appeared to be writing something on a long sheet of paper. She slammed the window shut behind her. He jerked and leaped to his feet.

"Good God!"

"It's a little late to call on God," she said furiously.

"I told you not to come here again." He was angry now.

"Indeed? Not even when I'm sent with a message? *Tell him they know. Not safe.* Does that mean anything to you?"

"Cleone?" His voice was filled with fear, and Arielle nodded with satisfaction.

"Cleone! She's been beaten almost to death, and she's having her child. *Your* child. She's a prisoner, with no one to help her. And her last thoughts are to save your worthless skin! Now you know! What do you intend to do? Run away?"

"You're damn right," he said grimly. "Men, clear this place out, then separate. They mustn't find any evidence."

Arielle gaped as men moved from the shadows of the room. She recognized some of them. Laffite's ruffians. What had she got herself into? She shrank back as the dreaded Gambi approached her. He leered at her, his eyes taking in the details of the gown, wet and plastered to her figure like a second skin. "I say she goes with us," he said. "She'll blab."

"Don't be a fool," Andre said. "Get moving. All of you, if you value your worthless hides." He picked up a pistol and moved in front of Arielle. "Go," he growled. "But for God's sake, keep your mouth shut! It'll go hard for you if you don't."

To his visitors, he shouted, "Remember, scatter. And it's one week from today, Black Island, on the Pearl. Have you got that?"

Behind him, Arielle slid the window open and backed through. Once in the garden, she began to run. Mounting the horse, she rode full tilt, back the way she came.

She had been *used*, she realized. Apparently Cleone knew of the meeting at Andre's tonight. She had, knowingly, sent Arielle into danger to warn him. She thought of the messenger who brought word from Ramon to his mother. The one she had seen with Cleone. It was said that the British were treating with Laffite, in order to take New Orleans. *Cleone was a British spy!* No wonder she'd been beaten so badly.

Let her take the consequences, she thought savagely as she dismounted upon reaching home. She left the horse to wander in the lot—let the stableboy think he erred—and ran up the service stairs. Half-way, she stopped and leaned her head against the wall. Traitor or not, mistress of a pirate or not, Cleone shouldn't face bearing her child under such circumstances. She would change into some dry things, then go try to face down Bathilde.

Coaley was asleep before the fire, salt tears dried white upon his small black face. Arielle shook him awake. "Go back to your bed," she said sharply. "I have to change. As soon as I get into dry clothes, I'm going back to help Cleone."

Fresh tears welled, and Coaley swiped a sleeve across his nose. "Cain't nobody he'p her now, Miss Arielle. She daid. Ol' Shug come up and telled me 'bout a hour ago."

Stricken, Arielle went down the service stairs

with the boy, watching until he reached the shed, to protect him from newly dead, uneasy h'ants. The hymn singing was still going on. She wondered if it were only for Ned—or if the slaves knew they'd lost another of their number.

Coaley might have been mistaken. Arielle moved to a sheltering bush where she could get a view of the cabin. The window still flickered with yellow light, but Bathilde had left her post.

It meant there was nothing left to guard.

Trembling, Arielle turned back toward the house. The sound of horses' hooves thundering across the arched bridge stopped her. She had a sudden wild vision of Andre at the head of his buccaneers, coming to wreak vengeance. At the sight of Ramon, she made a small glad sound, her first impulse being to run toward him.

Then she remembered her dripping hair, the sodden robe and gown. She could not greet him this way, not when he was accompanied by a troop of soldiers.

As she crouched, wondering how she'd manage to get into the house, Madam Villeré appeared at the service door. She talked to Ramon, pointing. Arielle could not hear the conversation, with the wind and rain in the leaves around her, but her heart sank as she understood the meaning of Ramon's homecoming—and the presence of the troop.

A conspiracy had been discovered. Madam Villeré had sent word to her son. And because of her own actions, the conspirators had gotten away. When the men reached Andre Villeré's home, they would find nothing but an empty house. All evidence would be gone.

The horses moved away, galloping across the fields, Ramon at their head. Ramon's mother stood

watching for a long time, her face taut with pride. Finally, she reentered the house.

Arielle waited still another while. Finally she came from her hiding place and hurried to the service door of the house. When she reached her room, she was chilled to the bone and could not still her shivering. It had been a night of horror.

It had been the same for Ramon Marquez. His mother's message had denounced Cleone as the informant who sent the message to Claiborne. Worse, she'd been intercepting Ramon's communications, passing their content to Andre Villeré. She had told of their meeting tonight, and had it not been for their hasty departure, some of the conspirators might have been caught red-handed. As it was, when Ramon and his men arrived, only a few footprints remained in the damp earth. Witnessed, they would be enough to talk Claiborne into putting Andre on his list of criminals—a list that was already headed by Laffite.

They rode back to Villeré-in-the-Swamp where Ramon dismissed his men to return to New Orleans and he himself dismounted, wearily. They'd ridden hell-for-leather when his mother's note alerted him. He was tired—and worried. Recalling Cleone's words—*I listened because I loved you. But not now! Now I'm with the other side*—he knew his mother spoke the truth. The only thing that matched Cleone's love would be her pride. And that, he had destroyed. He should have guessed her part in this, instead of suspecting Luisa.

But the other information, regarding the meeting at Andre's—wild horses couldn't drag something from Cleone that she regarded as private information. How had his mother gone about it? Vague fears had haunted him all through the journey.

He took an indecisive step in the direction of Cleone's cabin and stopped. It was dark. She would be sleeping, and he had not forgotten his last attempt to talk to her. Suddenly his hand went involuntarily to his cheek. Then the sound of singing reached his ears. The slaves' deathwatch. He froze, a prickling sensation at the back of his neck. He caught the trend of the words. *He got de cane laid by. A male slave then.* He went weak with relief. His mother appeared in the doorway, a candle in her hand. Her dark eyes studied his face.

"You didn't catch them?"

He shook his head. "They had been there, but they were gone."

She sighed. "It would seem we have more than one informer in our midst. Well, it cannot be helped now. Come in, son. Take off your wet cloak. You need a warm fire, and something hot to drink."

He followed her, obediently. "I heard the slaves singing."

She frowned a little as she hung up his cloak, and turned to fill a cup with steaming brew. "I'm sorry you had to know before morning. We lost Ned today."

He looked at his mother, eyes dark with grief. "We will miss him. He was a fine old man."

"I've been wondering which male will replace him," she worried.

"Good Lord! Can't you wait until the man's in his grave?" The rudeness of his tone startled him, and he put out a placating hand. "I'm sorry, Mama-cita. Now, tell me, where did you get the information you sent. What leads you to suspect Cleone? Does she know you suspect her?"

Madam Villeré told a carefully tailored story, deleting Arielle's part in it. Ramon's messenger had

been going first to Cleone. Suspicious, she had the girl watched. Last night she'd been seen with his stepbrother. He had been in her cabin until all hours.

A wave of jealousy shook Ramon, but he forced his voice to remain steady. "I do not think the girl would be made to speak of such things. How did you learn of Andre's meeting with Laffite's men?"

Madam Villeré walked to the window. "I have no knowledge of how to go about interrogating. I turned it over to Davis, the overseer, giving him a free hand in extracting any information he could from the girl. I told him his job hinged upon what he could get from her. I didn't mean for it to reach such serious proportions."

Ramon was on his feet. "Jim wouldn't hurt her! What do you mean?"

"I fear he took my threat too seriously," Madam Villeré said flatly. "Cleone is dead."

She shrank before the expression in his eyes. They held a glint of madness. Then he whirled and ran out into the night, running toward Cleone's cabin. He burst open the door.

There was no light, but the embers of a dying fire showed him more than he wished to see. The room smelled of blood—and of death. He walked as in a dream to the far side of the cabin and stood for a moment above Cleone's lifeless form. Kneeling beside the blood-soaked bedding, he gently stroked the bruised, swollen face. His tears rained down upon it, making the dried blood run afresh as he sobbed out his love for the girl.

Pulling the covers aside, he discovered something else. His child had been born this night. It was a little boy, with Cleone's honey-colored skin, its flesh still warm to the touch. Frantically, he

searched for a sign of breath, a small heartbeat. He'd come too late. The child might have lived, if there had been anyone to care.

Eyes haunted, he stumbled out into the night and brought water, built up the fire and heated it. Murmuring endearments, he laved Cleone's whipped, torn body, wincing at the sight of her hurts. "My sweetheart," he kept saying. "Oh, my poor love."

He found a basket of laundry, washed and folded for the house. Spreading a clean sheet on the folding table, he dressed the dead girl in one of Arielle's virginal flannel gowns. Then he bathed his own lost child, placing it in its mother's arms.

All that night, with the sound of mourning hymns filtering through the rear window of the slave cabin, Ramon Marquez kept his own death-watch. He explained his actions to the silent Cleone. He cursed God. He prayed. Eyes wild, in harsh, disjointed sentences he assured Cleone he had been faithful to her.

Toward morning, he drew a chair beside the makeshift bier. He experienced a few moments not of sleep but of a merciful blankness of mind. Then there was a space when the cabin walls seemed to melt away. He could smell the summer scent of the fields. Cleone was lying in the grass, looking up at him, smiling.

He forced himself to his feet. *You are my wife, Cleone. I am telling you, and I am telling God. I, Ramon, take thee, Cleone—*

He picked up the girl's frail body, careful not to dislodge the bundle he'd placed against her heart. His face was wet with tears and rain as he carried his precious burden through the weeping dawn.

## Chapter 16

Disconsolately, Arielle left the house. It had been several days since she woke to hear Ramon stumbling and raving in his room. She'd rushed in to find him clad in sodden clothing, burning with fever, his eyes senseless. There was blood on his hands, and he kept mumbling something about killing Jim Davis.

Unable to control him, she ran for his mother. Madam Villeré took over, getting him out of his wet things, dosing him with laudanum until he slept. Then she explained to Arielle.

Ramon had a brother's affection for the girl, Cleone. She herself, had loved the girl who grew up in this house like one of her own. Upon finding out Cleone was passing on government secrets, Madam Villeré felt helpless. She had asked the overseer,



Davis, to question her. She hadn't thought of the man's violent temper—

Arielle shuddered, recalling the change in the man when he was told of the trouble in the fields. But surely, with a wife who was pregnant, he would have compassion for a girl in the same situation.

Her mother-in-law said the overseer and his family had cleared out immediately after the incident. It was difficult to believe. Somehow she felt that April would be there, smiling, setting out her plain fare for her guest.

She approached the small house. It appeared much the same, the plantation castoffs still polished and shining from April's efforts. But without her presence, it all seemed shabby, worn. Steeling herself, Arielle walked into the bedroom. The cradle was gone, and the small chest. She had to face the truth of their leaving, but she still couldn't believe the man guilty of Cleone's death.

Something lay in a corner, on the floor. Her heart sinking, she picked it up. It was the little dress she had made for April's baby. Someone, in a fit of anger, had ripped it into shreds. It had to have been done by a violent man—

She left the house, feeling sick. Outside, the flowers April Davis had tended so carefully, were blooming after the rain. No one would need them now.

Arielle gathered an armful, shaking the damp from them, and carried them toward the slave cemetery. In the confusion caused by Ramon's illness, there had been no time to think of Ned or Cleone. Finding a new mound of wet earth, Ned's name crudely burned into a slab of wood, she placed some of the blossoms on the grave. Then she searched for the other, finding none.

Troubled, she walked back to the house. What had they done with Cleone's body? Had it been buried somewhere apart, because of her treasonable activities? Or—Oh God, no!—had it merely been dumped in the bayou. Her mouth was dry at the thought, and she swallowed hard.

There seemed to be a shadow over the whole plantation. Madam Villeré was pale and tired, Luisa refused to leave her room, Mindy was wan and cranky, the slaves sullen—and even Ramon was not himself as yet. After a day of delirium, he'd been vague, docile, almost slavishly obedient to his mother. He even moved into a room off her chamber in order that she might look after him. As far as he was concerned, Arielle did not seem to exist—even as a friend.

Her, musing stopped as she saw Mindy flying toward her, face alight with the old excitement.

"Arie," the child panted. "Oh, Ariel! You've got to come quick! We're going to New Orleans! We're going to stay in a big hotel! We're going to the governor's ball. And you're s'posed to pick out something pretty to wear. We're going to stay a week, and buy Chrismus gif's."

A ball! After this week of horror? She would never understand these people! And what about Ramon? Had he sufficiently recovered? She pondered on it as she and Mindy walked hand in hand to the house. On another level, she scolded the little girl, affectionately. "Chrismus gif's! I vow, Mindy, you're getting to talk just like Coaley!"

Mindy's information proved accurate. The house was in a bustle. Luisa had come from her room, a faint tint of color touching her pale cheeks as she joined in the excitement. Ramon even seemed improved as things returned to normal around him.

His eyes were still haunted-looking. There were new deep lines in his face, but he smiled at Mindy's antics.

By afternoon two carriages had been readied. Ramon, at his mother's insistence, rode with her, his riderless horse following behind. The other carriage held Arielle, Luisa, and Mindy. It was a pleasant journey; even Luisa was laughing, talking, more outgoing than she'd ever been before.

It was the plantation, Arielle thought. With the tragic happenings of late, it had cast a gloom over them all. It was good to get away. They would have a wonderful time, she thought, as they retraced the journey she'd made—after that first small, unacknowledged wedding.

By nightfall, they were put up in a hotel with sumptuously furnished rooms and elegant service. Ramon settled them in and left them for his bachelor quarters. Madam Villeré pulled at her lip at his decision, then decided it might be for the best. The sooner he returned to normal living, the better. Arielle, seeing that their suite only contained one large bed, was vastly relieved.

The next day was a busy one as the women prepared for the governor's ball. Gowns were steamed and pressed by a bevy of hotel maids parading in and out. Jewels were selected. Madam Villeré was as giddy as Mindy with excitement. She chose to wear a gown of deep crimson that made her look like a dowager queen. Luisa, her dark eyes gleaming with anticipation, was dressed in a deep rose that emphasized her coloring. Arielle, despite the jewels urged upon her, chose to wear her blue sapphire pendant with the velvet gown that matched her eyes.

She was a little nervous as she entered the

ballroom. Never had she seen such a glistening throng. Only the cream of New Orleans society was here. Government officials in full dress; their wives bedecked with rubies and diamonds; young officers, proud as peacocks in their uniforms. Following the direction of Luisa's shining eyes, Arielle saw Claiborne's youthful aide, Louis Daumont.

Instinctively, Arielle distracted Madam Villeré's gaze. Stepping in front of Luisa, she said, "Look at that woman—isn't she lovely? And what a beautiful gown!"

Her subject was well chosen. Madam Villeré's eyes filled with fire. "I happen to know she's a woman of color," she said. "I wonder who had the gall to invite her here?"

While she was still fuming, Governor Claiborne approached with Ramon. Ramon escorted his mother to a group of her contemporaries, and the governor took Arielle in tow. He led her toward his pretty wife and introduced her with pride. For after all, he had stood in her father's stead on her wedding day.

Arielle looked back. Luisa had disappeared.

The ball was an enormous success. Arielle danced until she was dizzy with movement and color. And always, the governor sought her out to stand at his side, drawing a few venomous looks from ambitious wives who wished to promote their husbands.

The talk was all of war. Claiborne was understandably piqued. The fool Congress had increased the army to twenty-five thousand men—and neglected to find the funds to provision them. Worse yet, none of them could be spared for New Orleans.

Hull had been forced to surrender Detroit, Earlier, the garrison at Michilimackinac succumbed to

the British. The garrison at Fort Dearborn was massacred by Indians.

"The government paid for this territory," Claiborne said angrily, "and then forgot it. The British can pick us off like sitting ducks, take the Mississippi—it's a hell of a thing!"

He stopped short, bowing to Arielle. "I beg your pardon, Ma'am. That—that dastard, Laffite, has me to the wall. I've sent dragoons after him. It's like trying to trap a weasel. I know he's bringing in arms and ammunition, smuggling them to some of our citizens. I fear some sort of British-oriented activity from within. If I could catch him in the act—"

Arielle's eyes went wide. She had remembered something. It might have a bearing on Claiborne's worries—and it might not. "Black Island," she said through dry lips, "on Pearl River—Governor Claiborne, I think you'll find him there—or some of his men."

He gripped her shoulders, oblivious of the shocked glances directed their way. "What are you talking about? What the hell is this?"

She shook her head, numbly. "Just something I overheard. It didn't make sense at the time. But if I'm right, it would be—," she thought a moment, "it would be November 16th."

"Good God!"

The governor stared at her for a moment. "It's worth a try." He grinned and turned to a bystander. "Eliot, find Daumont and Marquez. Tell them I want to see them in my study—on the double. And see if you can find General Villeré, or his son, the Major."

Again, he bowed to Arielle. "Forgive me, my dear. I must forego your charming company. I have much to do, and so very little time."

He went to his wife, whispered something to her, and disappeared.

It was some time before Daumont and Ramon joined him. They had not been easy to find. Daumont and Luisa had fled the ballroom and were wandering, hand in hand, in the gardens. Louis Daumont had always been a success with the ladies, an easy compliment ready to his lips. But not now. Now he was stricken dumb with his luck at meeting this beautiful girl again, of having her beside him.

Luisa, too, was silent. She was willing time to stand still, so they could be like this forever. The full, early November moon seemed to shine for them alone, circling them with golden light that shut out the rest of the world.

They reached the end of the pathway, and he drew her into a leafy bower. Her face tipped up to his, lit with moongold and enchantment. Leaf shadows moved across her bared throat and shoulders. Daumont trembled with the desire to kiss them away.

"Luisa," he whispered, "beautiful Luisa—"

She went into his arms with a small, inarticulate cry, her mouth taking fire from his as he slid the gown from one ivory shoulder.

Then he heard his name. "Daumont! Where the devil are you, man? Claiborne wants to see you—"

Ramon was nearly as difficult to locate. His mother had drawn him to a secluded spot beneath the stair. He must find Luisa at once. The chit was making a fool of herself. Someone had seen her in the garden with Daumont. Ramon was to find her immediately, and they would return to the hotel.

Ramon sighed. "She is young, Mamacita. Let her enjoy herself. After all, the governor's ball—"

"Is not a place to commit indiscretions," 'Mad-

am Villeré said grimly. "And certainly not with a Frenchman—and one in opposition to our plans. We can't trust her to keep her mouth shut. You know that. And she's to marry Edward Allingham."

"I go along with some of your reasoning, Mamacita. But not all. I will go look for her. I agreed we can't let her get involved with Daumont. But don't force her into marrying someone she doesn't like—"

"Why not?" his mother snapped. "I did! I did it for your sake, and I've never been sorry."

Ramon capitulated. He would go look for Luisa in the garden.

Eliot saw him as he stepped from his place of concealment and hailed him. He became one of the small group of men converging on Governor Claiborne's study.

Madam Villeré spotted Luisa. The girl stood just inside the door, looking lost and lonely. The older woman made her way toward her, sharp eyes taking in the girl's flushed face and disheveled gown.

"You look like a Jezebel," she hissed. "It's what one would expect of your father's daughter. Wait here. I will find Arielle and handle the courtesies with our hostess. Then we are returning to the hotel."

The ride back to their lodgings was a silent one. Madam Villeré was angry, her mind working at full speed. Luisa must be manipulated into marrying Edward Allingham, and soon.

Luisa was sullen, her face no longer pretty. It had lost its softness; it had become hard and cold.

Arielle was oblivious to their moods as she tried to sort out her own dilemma. She had provided the information Governor Claiborne needed to entrap

Laffite's men. She was getting what she'd always wanted—revenge. They would be caught, and with them, Andre Villeré—who had left the mother of his child to die, beaten, a prisoner, alone. It was retribution.

Then why didn't she feel better about it?

She went to Mindy's room upon her return, as she had promised, sitting at the foot of the child's bed as Mama used to do. Forcing an enthusiasm she didn't feel, she described the ballroom, the glittering assembly, the lovely ladies with their exquisite gowns.

"I wish I could have seen it," the little girl said wistfully. "It sounds like you had such fun."

"Oh, we did," Arielle lied. "We certainly did. We all had a wonderful time."



## Chapter 17

Mindy, sitting on a garden bench the next morning, was a very disturbed little girl. Ramon had come to breakfast with the news that he was leaving on a mission and would not see them during the remainder of their stay in New Orleans. Mindy noticed that he kissed his mother goodbye, but only favored Arielle with a smile. And Arielle looked so sad. Gossip in the quarters had it that they didn't sleep together. And somebody said he loved someone else.

Mindy didn't believe that. Arielle was too pretty. She herself leaned toward thoughts of Harry Fosbie. But Ramon *looked* like a man, and Harry didn't.

After Ramon left, his mother announced that they were cutting their visit short, going home this very day. She would take a list of their needs to the

factor and have them sent to the plantation. There would be no shopping for Christmas gifts in the bright, colorful city.

Mindy was vastly disappointed. Luisa even more, so. For she had burst into tears and disappeared into her room. Mindy wondered if Madam Villeré's decision had anything to do with a note delivered earlier. A note she read and burned.

Now Madam Villeré and Luisa were in the factor's office. Arielle was back at the hotel, with a headache. Mindy had been torn between her loyalties, wondering whether to accompany the two or remain with her sister. This time, she'd chosen to go with Luisa. She looked so woebegone.

Not once on the way had the older woman let go of her daughter's arm. And when Mindy pleaded to sit here, where she could watch the people while they transacted their business, Madam Villeré seemed glad to be rid of her. And Mindy was happy to wait. Talking business and leaving a list wasn't her idea of Christmas shopping.

She wished she knew what was wrong and how she could help. Luisa's mother acted like Luisa had done something bad. Maybe Luisa would tell her when they were alone. She told her lots of things, like how she hated Edward Allingham, and how she liked Louis Daumont who had come to Arielle's wedding.

But Arielle was different. She seemed grown up now. Far away. And there was something not quite right in the way she and her husband acted around each other.

Mindy wished Mama was here. She'd know what to do. Mama knew all about men.

A bee left the flowering shrub behind her, hovering curiously for a moment above the small

chrysanthemum head. She brushed at it, absently, trying to put her worries from her mind. They'd have a short time here. She wanted to make the most of it. She leaned forward, absorbed in the scene before her. Handsome men in their morning coats, beautiful women in seductive gowns. A Negro passed by, tall, cinnamon-brown, with fine features. He was singing in a strange tongue, a rhythmic, cadenced tune—just for the joy of being alive on a sunny autumn morning.

She jumped at a touch on her arm. Looking up, she saw a tall man, dark hair tumbling over a tanned forehead. He was dressed in ordinary clothes; a blue work shirt open at the throat, dark trousers. His eyes sparkled with amusement. He was quite the best-looking man she'd ever seen.

"Did I frighten you?" he asked. "I'm sorry."

"Not at all," she said loftily. "You only s'prised me. I'm waiting for friends."

"Such a pretty girl should not be left alone," he teased.

Mindy blushed, and he dropped to the bench beside her, the laughter suddenly leaving his face. "I'm going to ask you to do something for me," he said. "It is very important. I want you to take this message"—he thrust a sealed note into her hand—"to your sister, Arielle. No one else must see it. Give it to her when she's alone. Tell her—tell her—her opinion is very important to me—"

Then he was gone. Mindy sat staring at the message, a new suspicion forming in her mind. Maybe the apparent rift between Arielle and her husband was not Ramon's fault after all. With Mama, every man had been the one-and-only until she met the next. Maybe Arielle took after her.

She sighed. She would never understand grown-ups. She didn't like Madam Villeré very much, but the plantation had become home. And never in this world would she want to be separated from Coaley.

She was sure it was a love letter she held in her hand. Well, maybe she would give it to her sister—and maybe she wouldn't!

Seeing Luisa and her mother approaching, Mindy thrust the note into the pocket of her pinafore.

She was still musing on it as the small cortege left New Orleans and wended its way home. Madam Villeré insisted Luisa accompany her in the lead carriage. Mindy sat with Arielle in the other, the note in her pocket crackling like the voice of conscience. No matter what she decided, the little girl thought virtuously, she couldn't give it to Arielle now. He'd said *alone*. And there was the Negro driver.

Arielle was lost in thought. She jumped when Mindy spoke suddenly. "Arie, what's the matter with Luisa?"

"Is there something wrong?" Arielle forced herself to the present. "I hadn't noticed."

Mindy sighed. Sure enough, Arie had something on her mind. She hoped it wasn't a man. "I guess not," she said. "You don't talk to me very much anymore."

Good heavens! How can I? You're always with Luisa, or off with your friend, Coaley. I don't know where you are, half the time."

"Arie, we have a secret place. Nobody's s'posed to know. If Coaley don't care, would you like to see it, sometime?"

"If Coaley *doesn't* care," Arielle corrected her,

smiling. The little girl's face was anxious, eager to please. Arielle put an arm around her. "I would love to see your secret place."

For a time, it seemed they'd fallen into their old easy relationship. But as they approached the plantation in the dark hours of the night, Arielle drifted once more into a moody silence. Ned would not be there to greet them upon arrival. She would not see Cleone from her window in the morning. Their absence would always be a reminder of that night of horror, less than a week ago.

Life at the plantation returned to its old pattern. A slave named Seth was chosen to fill Ned's place. He was too old to work in the fields, and the dead man's clothing would fit. Seth's shoulders were bent, his legs a little bowed, and he did not have Ned's dignified presence. Yet, Madam Villeré mourned, he was the best they could do at this time. It would be difficult enough to find a hand to replace Seth in the fields, ancient though he was. The war had virtually stopped the import of Negroes into New Orleans, and many of the planters were suffering. At the Cortez plantation, struck heavily by a plague of yellow jack, there were not enough workers to tend the harvest. The Cortez family had lost everything, moved to New Orleans.

Thinking of how she'd urged Maria Cortez on Ramon, Madam Villeré breathed a sigh of gratitude. Ramon had known what he was about when he married Arielle. Her conduct at the governor's ball had been above reproach. It was easy to see Claiborne had an affection for her—an affection they could use to further Ramon's activities.

She coddled Arielle, smothering her with kind-

ness. The unloved Luisa flinched at her mother's actions, and sulked—making herself less lovable.

And in the mornings, Arielle rose to the sight of burly Bathilde at the laundry tubs.

Somehow, she managed to get through the day of November 16th. But that night, she didn't sleep. In the days that followed she watched anxiously for a message from Ramon to his mother. None came. She was unable to eat, and the face that confronted her in the pier glass grew paler each day.

Mindy didn't feel too well either. The love letter—for that she was certain it was—was still undelivered. Maybe that was what was wrong with Arie. Perhaps she was pining away. In Mama's plays, the heroines sometimes pined away—to lie beautiful and waxen upon their biers, while their lovers knelt beside them, crying. It was romantic, but it was also alarming. Mindy did not want Arie to die.

She took counsel with Coaley.

It was a cold, crisp morning at the end of November when Arielle received a formal invitation to visit the secret place. The cane was cut in the fields, and today the sugaring-off was to begin. Arielle knew she should stir herself to watch the process, but the thought brought back painful memories of Jim and April Davis. Where were they now? Had April's baby been born? How could she live with a man who'd do such a monstrous deed? Maybe she didn't know. She prayed that was the case.

Overcome with lassitude, Arielle found it difficult to stir up enthusiasm over visiting the secret place, though she tried. She followed the children who tiptoed furtively ahead of her, looking from side to side to make sure they weren't observed. Reaching the arched bridge, they carefully climbed

down the embankment on the left side, pulling back the heavy undergrowth to allow their guest passage.

At the base of the embankment, a narrow path led beneath the bridge, alongside the black fungus-freckled water where a battered wooden boat was secured, and on to the other side of the bridge. Here, an ancient, rotting cypress stood, its roots grotesque, covering a wide area.

Mindy pointed toward a small aperture. "In there," she said. "That's our front door."

Arielle, her hair pulled from its moorings by the trek through the underbrush, looked at the little entrance. It would be difficult to manage her skirts. She would have to get down on her knees to enter. Ruefully, she looked at the bank on this side of the bridge. "Why didn't we come down here, instead of taking a long way around? It looks easier."

"Somebody might have seen us," Mindy said importantly. "And it's a secret. Come on."

Sighing, Arielle followed. She'd have to change now as it was. Coaley went first, Mindy after him. Arielle wriggled through, scratching an elbow as she went.

Inside, she gasped. The roots formed a sizable room. Above, the hollow tree reared like a castle tower. The floor of the secret place was hard-packed from the children's playing and swept clean. A broom made of twigs leaned against one wall. In the center, a circle cut from a large tree was balanced on small logs of equal length to make a table. It was set for three, with large scrubbed shells serving as plates. In the center, a pile of cookies, crumbled edges showing they must have been smuggled from the kitchen, lay on a clean scrap of muslin. A shaft of sun, from a split somewhere higher in the tree, shone on the table in a golden dust of light.

"Mindy! It's beautiful!"

The little girl smiled, delightedly. "I knew you'd like it. It's our house. See, here is the bedroom. This is our child—"

The area had been marked off into rooms with tiny shells laid in straight lines to indicate the boundaries. And in one corner, the three roots forming a kind of cradle, lay Mindy's old rag doll, a relic of undetermined origin.

Arielle entered into the spirit of the thing. Coaley and Mindy were host and hostess, she the honored guest. Hearing the two children refer to each other as "husbin'" and "wife," she felt a cold chill, remembering Madam Villeré's words. When Mindy reached eleven, Coaley would be sold off. What a terrible thing that this innocent, beautiful friendship couldn't be continued through their lives.

Arielle managed to eat a few mutilated cookies, then said, "Absolutely delicious. But I don't think I could eat another crumb."

Mindy frowned at Coaley. "Coaley—I mean, husbin'—didn't you say you were going fishin'?"

He looked at her, bewildered, but rose gallantly to the occasion. "Oh—yes'm, wife, I sho'ly did." He approached Arielle and bent low above her hand. "Nice havin' you in our home, Miss Arielle. I hopes you'll come back sometimes."

He'd obviously been coached. Arielle hid a smile as she thanked him for his hospitality and said she planned to come often.

When he had gone, Mindy was strangely silent. There was an awkward interlude, and Arielle finally said, "This is a nice place, Mindy. I'm glad you invited me."

"Thank you." The small head was still bent, and Arielle searched for another topic. "I've been won-



dering—this is near the water—aren't you afraid of snakes?"

"Haven't seen any. Old Teeny made us a charm. Keeps snakes out."

There was another pause, then Mindy lifted her chin. "Now that my husbin's out, maybe we ought to talk some woman talk. Arie—how do you like being married? Is it nice, being in love with somebody?"

Taken by surprise, Arielle stumbled a little on her answer.

"Why—yes," she whispered. "I suppose so."

"Mama always was thinking about other men," the little girl pursued relentlessly. "Do you do that? I mean, do you ever think somebody else might be nicer than Ramon?"

Arielle paled. Mindy was everywhere at once and seemed to miss nothing. That night in the garden with Andre—had Mindy seen? Or her return from Andre's house, the way he had kissed her then.

"Mindy!" she evaded. "What a silly question!"

But Mindy had seen something in her sister's face. She rose grimly and marched over to the rag doll in its natural cradle. Sliding her hand beneath the poppet's skirts, she withdrew a sealed, crumpled note.

"A man gave it to me in New Orleans," she said. Pressing the paper into Arielle's hands, she went to the entrance of the tree-cave and wriggled outside.

Arielle looked at the paper in astonishment, turning it over to inspect it before she opened it. Surely it was a part of the play-party game the children had invented. Finally she opened it, and her heart jolted painfully as she read the words written in an unfamiliar hand.

*"My dear Miss Jones, it began. Hearing you were in the city, I decided to get this note to you,*

*though it may involve some danger to myself. I have no idea why it seems so important to set the record straight, but I must. You err in thinking the child Cleone carries is mine. I do, however, have a brother's affection for the girl, and am concerned for her well-being. As a fugitive, it is impossible to return to my home at this time. I beg you to help her, should there be trouble. It was signed, Sincerely, Mr. Smith.*

It wasn't Andre Villeré who fathered Cleone's child—but someone else. He didn't desert the girl when she needed him. And he'd asked her, Arielle, to help her. To help a girl who was now dead, buried in an unknown grave somewhere in the swamps—if she was buried at all.

Cleone was dead because of her association with Andre Villeré. But it had been she herself who brought that association to light. And the writer of this message might be no more. Again, Arielle would be responsible for a death. She had told Claiborne of the rendezvous on the Pearl—

Alone, in the tree-cave home of a small black boy and a little white girl, Arielle put her head down on the makeshift table among the polished shells and cookie crumbs, and cried.

## Chapter 18

The next few weeks passed smoothly. The sugaring-off was a profound success; the weather holding bright and clear so that the carts carrying the cane to the mill were not mired down as in previous years. Dark, thick molasses came into the house in pails, to be served with fluffy biscuits, hoecakes, or to be made into gingerbread. The kitchen smelled of spice as festive foods were prepared ahead for Christmas.

Arielle and Mindy were preparing, too. Mindy was more her old exuberant self, now that she'd delivered the message and her conscience was clear. But she kept a sharp eye on her sister, who seemed happy only when she was busy.

Luckily there was much to do. Arielle rescued all the scraps of material left from her trousseau and helped Mindy make gifts for Madam Villeré and

Luisa. A padding of Spanish moss, covered with velvet and glued inside opalescent shells made pin-cushions. One of crimson velvet for the older woman, one of rose for Luisa. They made handkerchiefs of fine lawn, initialed and appliquéd. Given permission to rummage the storeroom on the children's behalf, Arielle found an old slate. Its frame was broken, but she replaced it with strips of cane polished with beeswax. With a piece of sewing chalk attached to it by a string, it would be ideal for Coaley. Mindy could teach him his letters.

For Mindy, Arielle made a warm velvet cloak with a hood. She also made a small tufted satin comforter for the poppet in the tree-cave, thinking of April Davis as she did so. An embroidered tablecloth for Mindy and Coaley's play-table and a broken set of pewter flatware—also from the storeroom—completed her preparations.

The Yule log was brought in. Arielle and Mindy decorated the parlor with holly, placing fresh bayberry candles in ornate silver holders. Then they knelt to set up the crèche, touching the figure of the baby Jesus with reverent fingers.

As they worked, Madam Villeré worried incessantly whether Ramon would come. "After all," she said coyly, "how am I to get a grandchild if he does not?" And she worried about the guests. Christmas was a time for dropping-in. The Allinghams would attend, she was quite certain. And maybe Elena Herrera and her parents. And perhaps this year, the military branch of the Villerés would honor them with a visit. Surely, they would see it as expedient, since Ramon was in such favor with Claiborne.

Arielle thought of the Villeré home, where friends and neighbors felt free to call without invitation, where there was such a spontaneous enjoy-

ment of friendship. She wished they would come, for the sake of her mother-in-law. But she had an idea that Ramon's position—or lack of it—would have no bearing on their decision.

She said nothing, and soon Madam Villeré was back to fretting over Ramon again.

He had not arrived by Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning, Arielle woke to the sound of laughter and singing. "Chrismus gif," floated in the air like an anthem of joy. The gifts placed on the stoops of the slave cabins were not luxuries but necessities. A dress-length for each woman; shoes, so that one need not go to meeting barefoot; a twist of tobacco; snuff—

Arielle hastened downstairs where Mindy was exulting over her gifts. As she had expected, Mindy had made her a shell cushion too, lined with her favorite blue. It was not as perfect as the others, small splotches of glue showing since she'd done it alone. But it was her favorite gift, taking precedence over the elegant gown and hat to match, trimmed with egret feathers, that came from her mother-in-law and Luisa. As with her wedding gown, some slave had labored long hours making these. The pincushion was clearly, uniquely, Mindy's own effort.

"Chrismus gif."

The words sounded from the doorway where Ramon stood smiling. With a cry of delight, Arielle went toward him with outstretched hands. Though he paused for an instant, he didn't flinch away, but took her hands in his own.

It was only for a brief space, then his mother was between them, overcome with joy.

When he had calmed her, he distributed the gifts he'd brought. For his mother, a delicate lace

shawl. For Luisa, an ivory fan. Then he clasped his gift for Arielle about her throat; a rope of tiny, shell-pink pearls.

"I'm sorry," she said, swallowing tears. "I have no gift for you. I was unable to shop when we were in the city."

He smiled. "You have given me a gift, greater than you know." He turned to his mother. "Arielle mentioned something she'd overheard to Governor Claiborne. As a result, Laffite and some of his men were caught with loaded pirogues—and arrested for their smuggling."

"Then the snake is scotched," Madam Villeré said with satisfaction.

"Not quite. Laffite and twenty-five men were taken to the Cabildo. Then that damn Jean Baptiste Sauvinet went their bond. They were all released. I understand John Randolph Grymes, the district attorney, thinks they'll get off with a small fine."

"It was futile then."

Ramon smiled at his mother. "Not completely. The Marquez name heads the list now, in Claiborne's estimation. I have his ear—and his confidence. All because of the intelligence of my wife."

For a minute, green glinted in the older woman's eyes. Then she said, placidly, "It is well known that a man's destiny is guided by his wife—and his mother. Arielle, will you oversee the table I'm preparing for guests? Blanche is helping in the kitchen, and I can't trust Shug to manage properly. I want to hear the news of New Orleans from my son."

"I would like to ask a question first," Arielle blurted. "Was anyone—hurt in the arrest?"

Ramon shook his head. "We timed it badly," he admitted. "Those who were to pick up the goods had not yet arrived. We waited, but somehow they

were warned. The arrest was simple. We surrounded Laffite before he knew we were there. The pirates laid down their arms."

Weak with relief, Arielle went to her duties.

Much to everyone's surprise, the military Villerés did arrive. It was clearly a duty call. They stayed only a few moments, then made their excuses. The Herrera family called. They, too, remained only long enough to exchange greetings and have coffee and little cakes. It was late when the Allinghams came, trembling with excitement. It had been such a day! First, the cook had caught some grease afire in the kitchen. Then their off-horse had gone lame on the way. Elizabeth ate, while Edward gulped and ducked his way through the tale of their thrilling adventures.

Finally, Ramon stood. "I hope you will forgive me, but I have not had the opportunity to be alone with my wife in some time. I thought, with her permission, we'd take a short walk over the property—"

Arielle accepted with alacrity, while the Allinghams, overcome at the thought of romance, fluttered waxen fingers in effusive farewell.

Once outside, Arielle breathed a sigh of relief.

"Boring, aren't they?" he asked.

"Terribly," she said frankly. "I can't stand either one of them." Then, recalling they were his friends, "Oh—I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I can't stand them either." He made a wry face, as if he'd eaten a green persimmon, and she couldn't help the laughter in which he soon joined.

For a time, they walked in companionable silence. When they were far from the house, he

turned to her, eyes serious and dark as he studied her face.

"When I talked—in there," he gestured toward the house, "—about all you've given me, there was something I didn't mention. I didn't say anything about the kindness you've done in concealing our—our relationship from my mother, or how much I appreciate it."

Arielle looked at the grass at her feet as he went on. "I wasn't a husband to you on our wedding night. I—I can't be now, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to overcome the thing that bothers me. All I can say is that I will try. And if it doesn't work, I beg you to be patient, at least until the war's end. Then, if you want out—"

"You will have to be the one who wants out," Arielle said quietly. "I made some promises and I will keep them, unless you choose otherwise."

"I wouldn't. You are the only one who—who—oh God!" he cried, turning away in anguish. "If I could only explain."

Arielle moved a few feet away, her hands clasped, her knuckles white as she thought of Harry Fosbie.

"I think I understand."

Together they walked to the slave quarters where a holiday atmosphere reigned. For each of the slaves, Ramon had a greeting and a coin. Young Coaley clung to his master's knee in obvious hero worship as Ramon smiled and rubbed the little woolly head.

As they returned to the house, Ramon averted his eyes from the laundry cabin, until Arielle said, "There's Bathilde. You forgot Bathilde."

Taking a coin from his pocket, Ramon spun it



in the black woman's general direction. She sprang to scrabble in the earth for it.

"Merry Christmas, Bathilde," he said in an odd, choked voice.

"An' a merry Chrismus to you, suh," she sang out.

He was silent as they returned to the house. At the rear door, he smiled, a bit painfully. "I think we managed to outstay our guests," he said. "The Allinghams are probably gone."

The Allinghams had indeed departed, but another person had arrived. Madam Villeré and Luisa sat on a couch facing someone who was concealed by the back of a tall chair. Their faces wore a look of mingled confusion and enchantment. Seeing her half-brother and his wife, Luisa gestured rather helplessly. "Arielle—"

The name was left hanging as the newcomer arose, dumping a clinging Mindy from his lap as he unfolded his long length. He turned to face Arielle and Ramon, the cape he still wore about his shoulders swirling in a crimson-lined flare.

"The bride and bridegroom!" the newcomer said in a ringing, sonorous voice. "*Ah! She's beautiful, and therefore to be wooed: She is a woman, therefore to be won.*"

Turning to Madam Villeré and Luisa, he explained, matter-of-factly, "Henry Sixth, Act five, scene three."

Then, turning back once more to the young couple, he held out his arms in a sweeping gesture of welcome, booming her name, Arielle, on a note of joy.

"Thaddeus! Thaddeus D. Lindenwood! Oh, Thaddeus!" She ran toward the old man to be enveloped within the cape and pressed against his

towering angular frame. "When did you get here?" she wept. "And how long can you stay?"

"I've been here just long enough," he paused to fix Luisa and her mother with a passionately admiring eye, "to meet two of the most beautiful women in the world. And," he looked down at Mindy, "to hug my other best girl. As for staying," he coughed importantly, "I have canceled all my appointments. I shall remain as long as you have need of me."

That, thought Arielle as she shed tears all over his carefully mended coat, might be a long time. A very long time.



**BOOK II**  
**BARATARIA**



# Chapter 1

Lindenwood's arrival at Villeré-in-the-Swamp brought a new atmosphere to the plantation. As December moved into January, the weather outside was damp, cold, with a few falling flakes of snow that melted before they touched the ground. Inside, fires blazed, giving the house a feeling of cozy warmth, augmented by the tremendous magnetism of the old man's personality. He entertained them all with tales of his exploits; he quoted and postured. Mindy and Coaley clung to him, Madam Villeré viewed him with an unbelieving awe, and his presence aided in relieving the strain of Arielle and Ramon's unnatural relationship.

Only Luisa did not rejoice in the presence of Thaddeus D. Lindenwood. Prior to his arrival, she at least had the attention of Coaley and Mindy.

Now they seem to have completely forgotten her, both hypnotized by the man.

Returning from a visit to old Teeny's cabin, she paused. Despite her heavy cloak, she was chilled. But she couldn't bring herself to enter the house, where she seemed always on the fringe, the outsider, when it came to conversation. But then, hadn't it always been that way? She shivered a little, feeling the dampness to her bones. Born an unwanted child, into a house with two older half-brothers who already had a playmate in Cleone, Luisa had always been on the outside.

Earlier this morning, she had tried to break into the talk. "I think I will go for a walk," she'd said. And no one had seemed to hear. Nobody had said, "It's cold, take a warm cloak—don't stay out too long."

Nobody cared.

So she'd gone to old Teeny's cabin to discuss her last-night's dream. Her mother and the Allinghams were covering her with stones, and she couldn't move—

"Ba-a-ad," Teeny muttered. She rocked her wizened self back and forth in the shadowed cabin that smelled of strange herbs. "It mean you goin' to have temper tantrums an' quarrels with you loved ones. You goin' lose you friends. You do all them things I say?"

Luisa nodded, numbly. On a piece of parchment, using Dove's Blood ink, she'd written, *Loved one to be, possible mate, Come forth now. It's fate.* Then she'd anointed a voodoo doll with Attraction Oil, and tied the paper to its back. She'd laid it on a cotton cloth, sprinkling it back and front with red Love Powder, while saying, *"This is a person I sincerely woo. It is my love, my lover so true."*

She'd performed the Ritual of the Lonely every night. Then she'd met Louis Daumont. If it would only bring him to her, she could burn the little doll and toss its ashes to the wind.

In addition, she'd burned wishing candles, sprinkled herself with Venus Powder—and even managed to strew some Separation Powder on Edward Allingham, in hopes it would discourage his visiting.

Now she wondered if any of it would work. Teeny had a gleam in her eye when she'd said, "You goin' have temper tantrums." Maybe she wasn't analyzing her dream, the girl thought wearily, but her character. After all, anger and sullenness had been her way of survival. More than anything, she wanted to be loved.

For a brief moment, she allowed herself to think of the night in Claiborne's garden; the way Louis Daumont's arms had felt around her, the hardness of his body against her own as he had lifted her to melt and mold against him; the heat of his mouth—

What would have happened had they not been interrupted? How far would she have allowed him to go? A feeling of sick shame mingled with the passion that coursed through her at the memory of his touch. She would not have balked at anything he did. She could not have. She would probably have begged him to take her as a man takes a woman.

Perhaps Mama was right. She was a Jezebel, and therefore not to be trusted alone.

Inside the house, they were warm and comfortable. They probably hadn't noticed she was gone. Well, she would not go in—but where could she go? Not back to Teeny's, with this feeling the old woman was secretly laughing at her. The overseer's house?



It was cold, empty, since the Davises had gone; the chimney probably clogged with birds' nests.

She recalled the place she used to go when she was a little girl, in disfavor with her mother, rejected by the older children. She wondered if the cave beneath the cypress roots was still as large as it had seemed then. It had been so long ago.

Recapturing some of the feeling of daring from her childhood, she rounded the house and hurried toward the bridge. The ground was wet, and she slipped and slithered down the bank, keeping her balance by clinging to the undergrowth. Her excitement mounted as she approached the aperture that led to the underground room.

Bending low, she maneuvered through the small opening, then stopped, mouth open in surprise. This place was no longer her secret. Evidently Mindy and Coaley played here. A small boy's cane fishing pole leaned against one wall. A makeshift table, covered with a pretty cloth, was set with shells. In one corner, a doll lay beneath a tufted coverlet.

Luisa recognized the cloth and coverlet. They had been Mindy's Christmas gifts from Arielle. Arielle had known of this place. She'd been invited here and Luisa had not. And it was her own—her own—

Luisa put her face in her hands and cried.

It was a long time before she returned to the house. She was mud-spattered, disheveled, tear-stained, and she couldn't think of an excuse to explain her condition. It wasn't necessary. She passed the door to the sitting room, unnoticed. No one had seen her go. No one knew she returned. She might as well have been invisible. One of Lindenwood's comments evoked an explosion of laughter.

Luisa's lips tightened. She hated them. She hated them all.

When she came downstairs again, she was coldly composed. But apparently she was visible once more. Mindy ran toward her, shouting with excitement. They were going to get to go to Mardi Gras.

Madam Villeré's earlier decision had been to remain on the plantation. It was time to plant the seed cane, and without an overseer she felt compelled to remain on constant watch so that it would be properly done. But Ramon would be returning to New Orleans in several days, and he'd promised to find someone competent. Thus, they'd be free to go.

Luisa's heart lurched a little. For an instant, she dared to let her imagination range wildly. She would see Louis Daumont, perhaps find a way to slip away with him. And if she were a Jezebel as her mother believed, then let it happen! Edward Allingham would not be one to want damaged goods. And if nothing else came of it, well, an hour in Louis Daumont's arms would be something to remember—

"The Allinghams will go with us," Madam Villeré was saying. "Ramon will reserve balcony suites for us. We will be able to watch the masked dancers in the street in comfort, with people of our own kind."

And I will be hemmed in, thought Luisa. Guarded. Saved for Edward. She began to laugh, a little hysterically. Her mother shot her a reproving look. "I know you're excited, Luisa, but there's no need to become hoydenish. We must begin to make plans. Though we will not join with the street people, it would be nice to wear costumes—to enter into the festive spirit."

Mindy began jumping up and down, screeching

that she wanted to dress as a princess. Lindenwood quelled her exuberance by scooping her up. "*Hear thou this triton of the minnows?* Of course you shall, my lovely."

"Good." Mindy wriggled until he set her down. "Luisa, what are you going to wear?"

Luisa had gone. Her laughter had come perilously close to tears. She left the room.

Arielle had no time to think of costumes. With Ramon's departure imminent, she went over his wardrobe, sewing on loose buttons, reinforcing any dubious seams. Looking at her, her smooth head bent over his clothing in a domestic attitude, he thought how lovely she was.

Sometimes he felt like taking her in his arms. After all, he was a normal man, with a man's urges. But the ghost of Cleone stood between them. It still came to him at night, and he would wake trembling, his eyes wet, bound as close to her as if she still lived—

Until he could free himself, he dared make no gesture of affection toward Arielle. It would not be fair to her.

He didn't know that Arielle had a haunting of her own. She, too, dreamed of a normal, married state. But in those dreams, Ramon's image was persistently displaced by the features of another man.

Arielle looked up, the expression in Ramon's eyes frightening her a little. His face had softened, his mouth becoming full and sensuous with his thoughts. He—he looked as if he were thinking of embracing her. It was what she'd longed for, of course, but—not now—

"Have you said goodbye to everyone?" she asked, snapping a thread. "I will pack these for you."

Leaving her, Ramon wandered down into the parlor. It was empty. His mother was in the kitchen, overseeing the preparation of foods she insisted he take with him. Thaddeus and Mindy were evidently off somewhere. True to form, he did not think of Luisa, until she appeared beside him.

For a moment, they made small talk. Then she said wistfully, "Ramon, would you do a favor for me? I've never asked one of you before—"

Uneasy at the intensity of her expression, he said, "I will try."

"It is nothing difficult. I just want you to tell someone something. Do you remember the witch's hat I wore to Mardi Gras before—before Andre went away. You both teased me about it."

He grinned. "I remember. We said it was apropos."

"I'm going to wear it this year, with a mask and—I think a red gown. Would you give Louis Daumont that information, and tell him where we will be watching? I will wave to him."

She stopped, swallowing, and Ramon felt an unfamiliar wave of brotherly affection. Poor Luisa. Poor little girl. He'd always known his mother had maternal love only for himself. Perhaps that's what had made him uncomfortable around his half-sister all these years. Looking back, Luisa had never had a normal girlhood. She needed to be free for a while, to dance in the street with the masquers of Mardi Gras.

But his mother would never allow it. Luisa would escape this life only if she married Allingham. And then her life would be duller still. If it made her feel better just to see Daumont, to wave to him, what harm could it do?

"I will tell him."

"Please don't mention this to Mama." Her cheeks were blazing.

"Don't worry about it, Luisa," he said. Then he did something unprecedented. He brushed Luisa's face with his lips, in a brotherly kiss.

## Chapter 2

True to his word, Ramon sent an overseer to replace Davis. He was a big, muscular man with an underslung jaw, and he smelled like a goat. Arielle detested him on sight, though her mother-in-law seemed impressed with his qualifications.

Swinging a whip against the side of his boot, the man, Hawkins, stated that he could keep any damn nigger in line. He was good, and knew he was good. Therefore, he expected more than Davis was paid. And since he was a bachelor, he'd need a nigger gal to housekeep. He'd do the picking.

Madam Villeré agreed to his terms. The girl he chose from the quarters was Sukey, a slim little thing of fourteen. She was still a virgin, due mainly to the fact that she was old Teeny's great-granddaughter. No man wanted a hex put on him.

That night, Sukey's screams carried all the way to the slave quarters. Teeny did not sleep. She fashioned a cloth doll and stuffed it into a brown porcelain jug, tightly corking it. Then she trudged to the cemetery in a cold mist, where she buried the jug on the breast of Ned's grave. Tomorrow, she would bury a quart of ashes in the overseer's back yard while he was off to the fields, just to make doubly sure. Hawkins would die in nine days, or less—or nine months or less, whichever Papa Legba willed.

Nine days later, Hawkins was still alive. But Sukey had stopped screaming.

The first week in February, Arielle, Mindy, Lindenwood, and the Villerés left the plantation for New Orleans. Along the way, they were joined by the Allinghams. Madam Villeré insisted Elizabeth change places with Luisa, since she and the dear girl had so much to talk about. Elizabeth was vastly pleased at the arrangement, especially since Madam Villeré carried a basket of food for the journey in her carriage.

Luisa was not pleased. She sat white-faced and stony throughout the trip. It was a vast relief when the carriage rolled into the seething cauldron of merriment that was New Orleans at Mardi Gras.

The party that gathered on the balcony that night to watch the street dancing was not totally congenial. Lindenwood had come as himself, complete with cape. "*All the world's a stage*," he'd said. "*And we are merely players.*"

The Allinghams made an improbable Romeo and Juliet. Madam Villeré was a dowager queen in a powdered wig, Mindy a princess as she'd wished. Arielle intended to present herself as a Spanish gypsy. She wore a crimson velvet gown, with black lace

showing fetchingly where it was caught up on one side, and had made herself a mask with black lace ruffles hiding her mouth and chin. She planned to do her hair high with a Spanish comb.

Madam Villeré promptly changed her plans—and Luisa's.

She snatched the tall witch's hat with its flowing veils from Luisa's head. "You cannot wear that! You are too tall, anyway." She looked at the girl, speculatively. She also wore a red gown. It would be a simple matter to trade masks. And the hat was becoming to Arielle—

The change effected, they moved to the balcony. Arielle, in the tall hat, was vastly uncomfortable knowing Luisa was displeased. Luisa's cheeks burned with red spots of anger as she searched the laughing, milling crowd below for a beloved face.

The din was terrific. Castanets clicked, horns blasted, drunken voices rose in maudlin song. Laughing girls threw ribbons to capture their swains as they chained through the street before the hotel.

It should have been joyous, festive, but Arielle sensed the hatred radiating from her sister-in-law. And all over a confounded hat, she thought, exasperated. The tension was thick as custard. It made her head hurt. She would take the damned thing off!

Immediately below the balcony, confusion erupted. Two young men, vying for the favor of a pretty quadroon, began to shout insults in the Creole tongue, then engaged in fisticuffs. Onlookers cheered them and joined in the melee, absorbing the attention of the watchers above—all except one.



Arielle backed away from the others, stepping through the French window. Inside the darkened suite, she reached to remove the pins that fastened the tall hat to her upswept hair. Then she heard a movement. She was not alone—

Before she could cry out, a cloak was thrown over her head, stifling her scream of terror. She kicked and fought as she was lifted and carried from the room. It could not be Gambi! This man was taller than Gambi—

At last she subsided, half-smothered and frightened out of her wits. Her head bumped something and she guessed she was being taken down a narrow stair. She could not escape now, but perhaps when they reached the ground—

After what seemed an interminable time, he set her on her feet, keeping a tight hold on one arm as he pulled the cloak from her face. "You little wild-cat," he growled. "Dammit, Luisa, I only want some information!" He stopped dead, peering at Arielle. "Good God!"

"Andre!"

He clapped a hand over her mouth. "There's a price on my head. One word out of you to attract attention, and I'll land in the Cabildo. Do you want that to happen?"

Staring fearfully across his big hand, she shook her head. She had informed on him once, and that was enough for her conscience to bear. Traitor he might be, but she'd let him dig his own grave!

The macabre thought made her shiver, and he took his hand away.

"I'm sorry I frightened you." He grinned crookedly. "I seem to always be apologizing. That hat. I thought I recognized it. Luisa had one like it when we were kids—"

Arielle put a hand to her hair. The hat had been lost in her struggles, and her hair had fallen down her back to lie disheveled around her shoulders. "It is Luisa's hat. Her mother suggested we change."

"She manages to channel everything I do in a different direction. Even when she has no knowledge of my plans. *She* could be dressed as a witch! But this time—Arielle—this time, I'm not sorry. I'm glad it's you, and not Luisa. Except that I wouldn't have frightened you for the world."

He cupped his hand beneath her chin, raising her face to meet his. Her eyes, dark pools in a moonlit face, looked into his.

"Arielle, you're not sorry this happened, are you? Tell me—"

Dazed at his nearness, her throat tight, Arielle mutely shook her head.

His arms went around her. She felt overcome by a feeling of lassitude. The past did not exist. She wanted only to remain here, mindless, hearing the thudding of Andre's heart against her cheek.

He tipped her face upward again, and she felt herself drowning in his eyes, her mouth yearning for his. "You did get my note," he said. "You believed me. Thank God! Oh, thank God!"

The note! The note saying that she erred in thinking Cleone's child was his, asking her to protect the girl. She could see the words before her eyes as if they were written in fire. She stiffened in his arms.

"Cleone is like my sister," he continued. "She will tell you that, herself." His voice took on a note of pain. "It was my fault she was beaten. I had to know how she was, and if she and the child are both well. So I took the chance and came—to ask Luisa—"

Arielle stepped away from the circle of his arms. Puzzled, he dropped them to his sides. Reality had returned to her like a crushing blow. She drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"Cleone is dead."

Her flat voice staggered him. "Dead!" he repeated in a dazed voice. "Dead! My God! When—how—"

"The night I came after you. I told you she had been beaten."

"And she died from it?" His face was white with rage and grief. "That woman's a monster! I'll strangle her with my own hands. She killed her! She murdered her! Damn her! Damn her to hell!" He whirled toward the back stairs to the hotel, and Arielle caught his arm.

"I was responsible for her death," she said in a dead voice.

Andre turned to face her, incredulity in his eyes. "I was responsible," she said, again. "I saw you go to her cabin. I—I thought you were the father of her baby and should be forced to look after her welfare. I—I told Madam Villeré—"

"And she beat her to death, to learn what she knew." His tone was murderous.

"Davis did that," Arielle said, helplessly. "He was told to interrogate her and went too far. He left in the night. Mother Villeré was upset—"

"Indeed!"

Something had snapped between them. He was remote. A stranger. "I was at fault, too," she said again, helplessly.

"It's quite understandable," he said with an ugly note in his voice. "And quite in character. It was one way to get rid of a slave wench who was a

rival for your husband's affections. And running to Claiborne with word of the ammunition shipment really consolidated your position, didn't it?"

"You—you knew?"

"Who else would have told?"

"Andre, I'm sorry. Please believe me. I'm sorry about everything, especially Cleone." Tears were flowing, now, streaking her cheeks, salt on her lips. "I only wanted to help. Please believe me—"

"Help! Good God! Help!" His face was a sick gray, and he held her shoulders with hard hands, shaking her like a rag doll.

"Let me go," she whispered. "You're hurting me. I'll scream!"

"Scream your head off! I don't give a damn!"

His hands dropped away. "I'm going now. But I promise you that anyone who had anything to do with Cleone's death will pay. I'll leave you with that thought. If you want to stop me, all you have to do is tell somebody I'm in town. They'll hang me, and put me out of harm's way."

He turned and walked away, his head bowed, his shoulders slumped in grief and defeat. "Wait," she called after him. "Wait!" Then, "I promise you, I won't tell a soul!"

He melted into the darkness.

Arielle stood where she was for what seemed an eternity. Her legs were weak and trembling, her heart thundering out of control. Slowly, her senses returned. She raised a hand to wipe away the tears that still poured automatically.

Drawing a breath, she took stock of where she was. Garbage lay in piles at the rear of the hotel, mingling its odor with the river smells. Something slithered in the darkness. A rat, perhaps. She re-

treated to the safety of the stairwell, attempting to straighten her rumpled clothing. Her hair fell in disarray.

It made no difference, she thought dully. Nothing seemed to make any difference.

Moving like a sleepwalker, she returned to her suite, changed to a bedgown, and went to bed. Mindy, sent to look for her, returned to report that Arielle was asleep.

Mindy couldn't know that her sister was only pretending. That Arielle felt as if she would never sleep again. She alternated between self-condemnation and prayer. A prayer that Andre would manage to get away safely.

He did, but not without difficulty. Blind in his anger and grief over Cleone's death, he'd grown careless. For a moment, he allowed himself to be silhouetted against the night sky on the levee. At a guard's challenge, he dove downward to reach the flat-bottomed boat in which he'd crossed the river.

The guard fired. Disgruntled at drawing duty on this gala night, he'd been imbibing on the sly and was a little tipsy. Still, his arm retained some accuracy. Andre swore as he tumbled into his boat, his shoulder numbed from the bullet that knocked him off his feet.

Rising, he managed to pole the boat into mid-river, hiding behind a wooded shoal before the guard reached the levee. There, in a small, sheltered backwater, he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The guard could see nothing. Either he had fired at a figment of his imagination, or he'd hit a skulker who'd fallen into the water. The latter sounded better. It might look good on a report. But

if he reported to his commanding officer now, he might be accused of being drunk on duty.

He took another long pull from his bottle and decided it was best to let well enough alone.

## Chapter 3

The small caravan returning from Mardi Gras was a quiet one. Elizabeth Allingham, replete with holiday foods, drowsed in the carriage beside Madam Villeré. Luisa, in Edward's vehicle, felt drained of emotion. She had not seen Louis Daumont. She would probably never see him again. Edward, believing her head still to be aching, was overflowing with sympathy and consideration.

Perhaps she would marry him, Luisa thought wearily. It would be the easiest course. His passions would be as dry and sterile as his appearance. Something she could endure. In the Allingham household, she wouldn't be an unloved, unwanted daughter, but closer to the status of a pampered pet.

She sighed, and he eyed her, instantly solicitous. She sighed again, thinking of Louis Daumont's sensitive face, his tender eyes.

They stopped at the Allingham plantation to refresh themselves before going on. Here, the furniture was dark, heavy, built for durability. In contrast to the Villeré plantation, there was little color. Plum-colored couches lined walls of gray or beige. A stinging fire smoked in the parlor. The rest of the house was cold. Luisa shivered.

As Elizabeth saw the others to their carriages, Edward put a timorous hand on Luisa's arm, detaining her just inside the door.

"You know I admire you, Miss Luisa," he said, ducking and gulping. "I have spoken to your mother, and she is pleased. Do I dare to hope?"

"It—it is too soon," Luisa whispered.

"Then I will be patient." He stepped backward, then forward again, clutching at her shoulders with trembling hands as he planted a dry kiss on her cheek. "Forgive me, Miss Luisa. I cannot control my feelings."

With an insane desire to laugh, Luisa pulled from his grip and hurried to join her mother. She climbed into the carriage, and Madam Villeré reached to pat her hand, smiling with satisfaction. It was an unwonted gesture of affection.

Luisa looked at her hand, closing the other one over it as if to hold the woman's touch. Maybe her mother would come to love her if she obeyed and married Edward Allingham. But she couldn't! Oh, dear God, she couldn't!

What was she going to do?

Arielle, in the other carriage, equaled Luisa's state of desperation. Her somber state had been excused by the others, since Ramon had been present very little during the Mardi Gras celebration. There had been a rumor that there would be some political activity under the cover of the festive



event. Ramon, Daumont, and others of the inner circle had stood guard at Claiborne's home for most of the time. Ramon had appeared only for a brief farewell.

Arielle let her family think what it would. She had not missed her husband at all. Since her meeting with Andre, their conversation had filled her mind. Sick with guilt, she had gone over each word, seeking justification, trying to replace guilt with anger.

He had not heard her out, let her explain.

But what was there to explain? Her tongue had been at fault in both cases.

She had been trying to help Cleone. As for informing on the transfer of ammunition, it was hardly her fault that Andre had chosen the wrong side.

And the things he'd said. Accusing her of getting rid of Cleone because she was a rival for Ramon's affections! Poor Ramon, incapable of fulfilling a husband's duties! As for going to Claiborne, that had been in defense of her country.

She should hate Andre Villeré! Hate him! Hate him! Yet she had only to close her eyes to see his dark features, his tender mouth—

"Wake up, lazybones," Mindy said, shaking her and giggling. "You look like you've got a stummick-ache."

Arielle forced a wan smile. "I wasn't really asleep. I was just resting my eyes."

"Then why didn't you hear what I said?"

Trapped, Arielle resorted to evasion, "It's probably because you talk so *much*. I suppose I thought you were talking to Thaddeus. What did you say?"

"I said I didn't like the Allinghams," the child said candidly. "And I didn't like their house either. I'd just die if I had to live there!"

Arielle, still torn by her own emotions, snapped at her small sister. "It doesn't make any difference if you like them—or their house. They're Mother Villeré's friends, not ours."

Lindenwood drew his cloak about him, pretending to cower in fear before her temper. "*Thou canst not say, I did it. Shake not thy gory locks at me!*"

Arielle had to laugh at his idiotic performance, and Mindy joined in rather dubiously. After a few moments, she asked, "Arie, are you mad with me?"

"Of course not, sweetheart." Arielle put an arm around her and drew her close. "I shouldn't have been so short with you. I guess I was asleep, and hadn't quite woken up yet."

After a time, the little girl said, stubbornly, "I don't like them, Arie. And Luisa doesn't either. I hope she doesn't marry him."

Arielle thought of the girl who glowed in Daumont's presence, who now sat slumped, defeated-looking, in the carriage ahead. Despite her loyalty to her mother-in-law, she couldn't help feeling the woman was wrong in discouraging Daumont's attentions and promoting a marriage to Edward Allingham. But after all—Luisa was a grown woman. She should have a mind of her own.

"I think we shouldn't discuss it," she told Mindy. "After all, it's Luisa's decision to make."

Mindy was silent until they reached the plantation. Then she ran off in search of Coaley. Arielle had the feeling that she had been weighed, and found wanting.

Life at the plantation settled into its old routine. Madam Villeré's first act was to call Hawkins, the overseer, in for an accounting. She was vastly pleased with his report, so pleased that she was prepared to overlook his one bit of bad news. The girl, Sukey, his housekeeper, had run away.

"You sent out a search party?"

He shrugged. "No need. Follered her myself. Tracked her into the swamp, onto shaky ground. Knowed she was gone for good. Found this on a branch." He exhibited a scrap of pink calico. "So I picked myself another gal, the one called Junie."

"Junie?" Madam Villeré pulled at her lower lip. "Isn't she about twelve? She's rather young—"

"Old enough," the man said with a leering grin. Then he added, sedately, "Enough to tote water, wash floors, things like that. Not much he'p in the fields, so there ain't no loss there—"

His employer looked at her ledgers. The incredible amount of work this man had accomplished far outweighed the cost of one small female slave—even two. "Take Junie," she said. "And—Hawkins, you're doing very well. I hope you're happy here."

He bowed himself out, obsequious before his boss-lady. But meeting Arielle in the hallway, he looked her up and down with bold eyes and an expression that made her shudder. It helped to stiffen her resolve to have something out with her mother-in-law.

Rapping at the study door, she entered at the older woman's command, then paused, wondering how to begin. Mindy had come to her with an incredible tale she'd heard from Coaley. Trying to check the story's validity, Arielle had questioned Shug. The black woman said she knew nothing of

the situation. But she looked fearful, and her eyes rolled as if she were lying.

"That man, Hawkins," Arielle began. "I don't like him. I think you should get rid of him."

Madam Villeré's brows shot high. "Indeed? He's proved an exceptional overseer. I hardly think one's likes or dislikes—"

"They say he murdered Sukey," Arielle broke in. "He dumped her body in the swamp somewhere. They say—"

"Who says?" the older woman asked coolly. "Come, Arielle, when you come up with rumors like this, you must be specific."

"They—it's being talked about in the quarters," Arielle said, her face red. "Mindy overheard—"

Madam Villeré put down her pen and sighed. "You must give me credit for knowing these people, Arielle, as you obviously do not. Such tales run through the quarters like wildfire. Someone thinks something *might* have happened. It is embellished as it goes along. Soon it becomes the gospel truth to them. They are superstitious and imaginative. And, to be blunt, Mindy has quite an imagination, herself. She may have embroidered the tale a wee bit, too."

"They say he whipped Big George almost to death," Arielle said in a low voice.

"*They*, again?" The woman's emphasis made Arielle feel stupid, like a scolded child. She reddened, and Madam Villeré went on.

"In the first place, George is a valuable property, strong as a bull. I do not believe an efficient overseer would damage a man he'd find hard to replace. Do you?" Arielle didn't speak, and Madam Villeré continued. "I do not doubt that George was whipped—or that he deserved it. It would not be

the first time. He's not exactly the most tractable slave on the place.

"So there you are. George was probably whipped for insubordination. And Sukey, according to Hawkins' report, ran away. I do not intend to fire the best overseer I ever had on the basis of rumor."

Madam Villeré slapped her account book shut as a signal that the discussion had ended. Arielle stood her ground. "I think it should be checked out, Mother Villeré. I do not trust the man."

"That is precisely why I plan to remain in authority until you are older and wiser, my dear."

Arielle flinched as though she'd been struck. Wordless, she returned to her room. Sitting down, she buried her face in her hands. Her mother-in-law could not consciously be cruel, she thought, trying to cling to the shreds of her loyalty for the woman. Perhaps, in choosing to ignore Hawkins' brutal nature, she could pretend it didn't exist.

She leaned her head back against her chair, her fists clenched. It was also possible Madam Villeré was right, and the rumors were unfounded. But Arielle could not forget Cleone, bruised, battered, dying. If Jim Davis were capable of that, then what might Hawkins do?

Somehow she would find proof of his brutality. And she would have the man drummed off the place!

Her decisiveness gave way to hopelessness as she viewed her situation. She was married to the son of this house—but was not his wife. Here, at Villeré-in-the-Swamp, his mother ruled in all things. If she did find proof, would anyone listen to her?

Feeling stifled, she rose to open the window. From the darkness beyond, she seemed to hear a

shrill, thin scream. She listened for a moment, but it didn't recur. She returned to her chair, wondering if it had been the cry of a wild animal in the swamps—or the echo of her own conscience. Knowing something was wrong and not doing anything to mend it made her as guilty as anyone else.

## Chapter 4

That night, lying alone in the netting-swathed bed, Arielle decided she would confide in Lindenwood. It would help to ease her mind. Then she would go to Ramon with the ugly rumors when he next visited. Old Thaddeus was her friend. And for that matter, she thought wryly, so was her husband. At least she would be taking some positive action.

Unfortunately, fate intervened in the form of a gripe that attacked the old actor sometime in the night. For a day or two, he was in delirium, quoting odd bits about death and dying. The household turned to him, Madam Villeré nursing him herself, a parade of servants bringing possets and potions. Even Luisa came out of her sullen shell to sit beside him and bathe his brow.

Arielle, insisting upon a stint at his bedside, knew that she could never take her worries to him.

Without his dramatic, rather sinister attire, Thaddeus looked what he was. A very tired old man. His voluminous nightshirt seemed to emphasize the spare flesh that covered his long-boned body. As if sensing her thoughts, he opened his eyes and looked at her, questioningly.

"You're a very handsome man, Thaddeus D. Lindenwood," Arielle said, softly.

He sighed, mournfully. *"Praising what is lost, makes the remembrance dear."*

"From *All's Well That Ends Well*," Arielle guessed. "Thaddeus, you're an old fraud!"

He closed one eye in a wicked wink, and from that moment seemed to improve. Within a week or so, he was able to sit in a chair in the sun, holding forth to delighted audiences consisting of Madam Villeré, Luisá, Mindy, and Coaley.

Watching, Arielle discarded her worries. She loved Thaddeus, but what she'd said was true. He *was* a fraud. For years, he'd complained about the effects of the cold northern winter on his bones. In coming here to be with the girls he regarded as his own, he'd found himself a soft, warm nest. Though he'd made noises about returning to do a play, Arielle knew he had no intention of leaving. At least, he seemed easily dissuaded by her mother-in-law's importuning.

She wondered if the woman might be a little in love with him, then discarded that notion. He was far too old, even for her. She loved his courtly manners, his air of being someone important. For a moment, Arielle wondered if Madam Villeré might not be a bit of a pretender—that the Marquez family was not all she claimed it to be.

Ashamed of her thinking, she decided that Lindenwood had brought a bit of color and drama to



Villeré-in-the-Swamp, to an otherwise dull way of life. And Madam Villeré had been kind to him in his illness. That was what she must remember. She would never again think of her as an ogress who sat idly by while ugly things were done in her name.

It was the stolid Shug who brought back her nightmare imaginings. Brushing her young mistress's hair, the woman seemed to have something on her mind. Arielle watched her face in the mirror, wondering, as it seemed to undergo a series of contortions. Finally the Negress set her jaw and said, "That man really mess poor Junie up."

"Junie?" Arielle thought of the young girl who sometimes joined in play with Mindy and Coaley. She hadn't seen her in some time. "What are you talking about? What man?"

"That man she housekeep for. She take Sukey's place."

Arielle whirled, looking up into the black, set face.

"You're talking about Hawkins! It is true then! Dear God in Heaven!"

Shug backed away, her eyes glinting with fear. "I don't know nuthin'. I didn't say nuthin'. You say I did, I gits whapped and sent back to the field."

A wave of cold swept over Arielle, chilling her to her bones. "I didn't hear a word, Shug. But I'm going to see for myself."

"You watch that man. He crazy-mean."

Arielle swallowed, thinking of his brutish features, the way he had looked at her. "He'll be in the fields. I'm going to his house and talk to Junie."

A short time later, she approached the house where the Davises had lived. It was a beautiful spring afternoon. The shrubs April had tended were burgeoning, buds bursting into tender bloom. Ari-

elle felt a pang of remorse as she recalled the happy times spent in this very house. As she approached the door, her courage faded, her knees beginning to tremble. If Hawkins were by some chance here, if he opened the door to her—what would she do?

There was no answer to her timorous knock. She rapped again, and presently she heard a shuffling sound. The door creaked open a little, and a small, frightened voice asked, "Who there?"

"It's me, Junie. Miss Arielle." Arielle pushed her way in, stopping in shock at the sight of the figure before her.

"Junie!"

The girl shrank from her, and Arielle felt a wave of sickness rise in her throat. The child's face was battered and swollen. There were burns on the thin arms that thrust from her sacking dress—and what appeared to be animal bites. Worse was the half-mad look in the girl's swollen eyes.

"Junie! He did this to you?"

Junie put a scarred wrist over her mouth and began to cry, in a high, thin wail.

Arielle shook with anger at what had been done to the child. "You're coming with me," she said. "Now! Can you walk?"

Putting an arm around the thin body, she half-led, half-carried, Junie back toward the big house. All the way, she was conscious of the eyes of the slaves who remained in the quarters. Old Teeny peered from her dark cabin. Bathilde watched from the laundry, hands on hips. They watched, the old ones, the children; those who for one reason or another did not go to the fields. And no one stepped forward to help.

Leaving the girl in Madam Villeré's small study, Arielle went in search of her mother-in-law.

Leading her to the study, Arielle threw open the door and led Junie to a chair. "There," she said, "is proof of Hawkins' behavior!"

Madam Villeré was less shocked than angry. "You know better than to sit in one of my chairs," she snapped at Junie. "Stand up!"

The child struggled to her feet as the woman glared at her. "I am your mistress! You have no business going whining to others. You know that!"

Junie cowered, and Arielle moved between them. "I told her to sit there," she said hotly. "Can't you see she's hurt and sick? And she didn't come whining to me! I went to her! I demand that man be dismissed!"

"May I remind you again that you have no say in the matter?"

"Then perhaps Ramon will!"

Facing Arielle, Madam Villeré realized she had, at last, an adversary. Odd that the girl who had been tractable heretofore should turn into a lioness—and especially so, since only a small Negro slut was the cause. She wanted to shake the girl, to tell her Ramon had little influence in such decisions.

Then she remembered Cleone. There was no sense in raising new questions in Ramon's mind.

She raised a helpless hand. "Don't be angry, dear. I'm certain Hawkins had his reasons—unless, of course, the girl did these things to herself. These nigras can be aggravating sometimes. But I promise to take it up with him. Now, if you will return her to his house—"

Junie moaned pitifully, and Arielle stood fast. "I will not return her into that brute's hands. I will take her to my own chambers. She cannot leave the house until he is gone from here!"

"*Dios*," her mother-in-law sighed. "Arielle, you

cannot imagine how you are disrupting the whole plantation! The slaves who saw you bring her into the house—in this condition—will be demoralized. Taking her word against a white man's will destroy discipline. But, very well, I will meet you halfway. I will send her to the laundry. Bathilde will watch over her until I have a chance to get to the bottom of this thing."

She pulled a bell cord, and Blanche entered. Before Arielle had a chance to demur, the thing was over and done, the Negress escorting the pathetic, battered waif from the room.

Helpless, Arielle watched them go, then turned to her mother-in-law. "For my own peace of mind," she said, "I want you to promise me that man won't get near her again. That he won't punish her in some way because I interfered. That he'll be dismissed if he even tries."

Madam Villeré smiled. "That, I can promise. Bathilde will watch over her."

Numbly, Arielle recalled that Bathilde had watched over Cleone, too.

Though friendly relations were once more established and the older woman was even more affectionate than before, Arielle had no appetite that night at dinner. Luisa, too, seemed unusually quiet. She looked paler than usual, and Arielle wondered if she were coming down with grippe. Despite Mindy's chatter, and Lindenwood's efforts to enliven the conversation, the atmosphere felt heavy, oppressive. Arielle excused herself early, and went upstairs to prepare for bed.

She couldn't forget Junie, and imagined her lying out there in the laundry cabin. Junie's face became Cleone's, blood-streaked and tortured as she twisted in the throes of childbirth. It had been due

to Arielle's interference, no matter how well meant. And now she had interfered again.

At last she drifted into half-sleep, only to come wide awake at a sound in the room. Raising on one elbow, she parted the netting. The banked fire illuminated a ghostly figure standing at the window. Arielle gave a small gasp at the sight, and the figure turned.

"Did I frighten you? I am sorry." It was Luisa's voice.

"It's quite all right." Arielle swallowed. "But what are you doing here at this hour?" Climbing out of bed, she lit a candle, then looked to Luisa for an answer.

"Your window," the girl said obscurely. Then, "It does look out toward the quarters, doesn't it. You can see the laundry from here."

Arielle shivered at her sister-in-law's dull tone. Had the girl lost her mind? Her face was pallid in the candlelight, her eyes circled with blue shadows—

"I would imagine you've seen some strange things from here," Luisa went on.

Arielle felt a shaft of anger. It was enough for Luisa to be sulky, unfriendly. She could live with that. But to come here in the middle of the night to taunt her for the actions that led to Cleone's death—it was too much! They might as well have it out.

"Just what are you getting at?" she asked.

Luisa turned, trailing her fingers over the windowsill, then turned back, her face a mask of frustration and despair. "Nothing," she blurted. "Nothing. I'm going now."

She stumbled toward the door, then looked at

Arielle, eyes brimming. "Just watch, that's all." Her voice broke on a sob. "If you want to know what really goes on here, just watch!"

The door closed behind her. Arielle stared at it, stupefied. Was Luisa stark, staring mad? Or did she have a purpose in coming here? Was it some kind of warning? Why had she come in the night, going to the window? What had she expected to see?

Hawkins! Somehow Luisa'd gotten word that Hawkins would be coming for Junie! Not wishing to become involved herself, she preferred to drop a mysterious hint so that someone else would stand guard—

Arielle dressed hastily, then seated herself by the window, a heavy candlestick at hand. If Hawkins approached the cabin she would scream to rouse the household, and fly down the service stairs. If he did not—then nothing would be lost, since there would be no sleep for her this night anyway.

In that she was mistaken. She was half-drowsing when a sixth sense jerked her awake. The door to the cabin she watched had opened, emitting a yellow rectangle of light. A figure entered, but it wasn't that of Hawkins. This one was small beside the bulk of the big Bathilde, who stepped outside as the other went in.

Arielle blinked. It had looked like Madam Vileré. But it could not be. And if it was, why had she gone to the cabin in the middle of the night?

Arielle left her chambers and went down the service stairs, the heavy candlestick in her hand. She intended to establish the identity of the furtive intruder. Outside, in the dark, her determination wavered.

It was her mother-in-law in there. She was sure of it. Maybe Junie was ill, and her mistress had been called to minister to her. It would be embarrassing to create a scene, forcing her way past Bathilde, if this were the case.

She faltered, then remembered Luisa's desperate plea. Nothing could be wrong, but she intended to see for herself.

Gliding through the darkness, she entered the narrow space between the cabins, shivering at the memory of that other night. Except for the tree frogs' incessant music, everything was still as she fumbled beneath the rear window, finding the molasses keg she'd used before still there. Stepping up on it, she looked into the room and put her hand over her mouth to smother a sound.

Madam Villeré stood in the doorway beyond, her features contorted in ugly excitement as she stared at Junie, cowering on her pallet. The woman had a whip in her hand, and as Arielle watched, she shook out its coils.

"Ah! No!"

Arielle's gasp was drowned in the sound of her mother-in-law's voice. "I'll teach you to stir up trouble, you little bitch!" The whip cracked, bringing a spurt of blood from Junie's shielding arm. It drew back again.

"Stop," Arielle called. "For God's sake, stop!" Her words lost themselves in Junie's screaming. The whip cracked again.

Arielle's only thought was to get inside that cabin and wrest the whip from Madam Villeré's cruel hand. She stepped back from the window, too hastily to watch her balance. The keg tipped and she flailed for a moment, then pitched forward,

striking her head on the candlestick she'd dropped at her first shock.

There was a brief instant of whirling, flashing light, a spinning sensation. Then everything went black.



## Chapter 5

Arielle woke, completely disoriented, her head thundering. For a time, she couldn't imagine where she was. She managed to get to her feet, staggering a little, leaning against the cabin wall for a moment while she tried to clear her mind. Then it came to her. She was in the narrow space between the laundry cabin and another. But what was she doing here?

Cleone! Cleone needed help, and she must find it for her.

No, not Cleone, but *Junie*.

She reeled sickly as she remembered the dreadful thing she had seen through the window. But the window was dark now, indistinguishable from the rest of the structure. Remembering that she had fallen, she put a hand to her head. Her fingers came away sticky. Was it blood? But there was no time to think about herself. She had to get help for Junie!

But who should she call? Not Madam Villeré, she thought, shivering. Luisa? Luisa had warned her to watch over Junie, but when it came to a face-down, she would side with her mother. Thaddeus Lindenwood was still too frail after his illness. The shock of what happened might kill him. The slaves were too fearful—

Leaning her head back against the wall, tears running down her cheeks, she once more confused Junie and Cleone. Forcing herself back to reality, she knew she'd found the answer.

Andre Villeré!

He had been a fugitive, but that was long ago. He would be in his house! He had to be. After what had happened to Cleone, he would certainly try to rescue Junie from a similar fate. And if she told him that now she knew her mother-in-law suffered from madness, perhaps he would forgive—forgive—

It was only through luck and the hour of the night that Arielle wasn't seen as she stumbled openly to the stables. There she found the stableboy snoring away and steadying herself, she tiptoed around him. She had to pinch her horse's nostrils together to still his welcoming whinny. Quietly, she led him outside, then returned for a bridle.

She was so weak that it took several attempts before she could mount the tall animal. Then she held his gait to a slow walk until they were out of earshot.

From that point, she only remembered urging the horse into a gallop, and lying face down against his flying mane as he raced through the darkness. The sound of hooves on a wooden bridge brought her awake. She had almost reached her destination.

Andre's vine-clad house was dark, and her heart plunged in disappointment. She slid from the horse's

back and leaned against it for a moment, too weak to stand, then gathered her strength and approached the front door. Of course it was dark, she told herself as she lifted a hand to knock. It was the middle of the night. He would be sleeping—

When a sound of footsteps answered her rapping, she leaned her forehead against the door. "Thank God," she whispered. "Oh, thank God!"

The door opened and she half-fell into a man's arms, bursting into wild weeping. The arms holding her tightened cruelly, and she looked up, blind with tears.

The face that appeared through her misty vision was not that of Andre Villeré. The features, grinning, scarred, cast in a mold of evil, were straight from a nightmare—Arielle's nightmare.

"Look, my friends," came Gambi's voice. "Look what I have captured! A little bird."

Arielle fainted once more.

Gambi's companions gathered about him, looking with wonder at the girl he held, at her long dark hair tumbled around her shoulders; at the spreading bruise on her forehead; at her full pointed breasts, accented by the way she was held so carelessly over Gambi's arm.

There were only the three of them: Gambi, least trustworthy of Laffite's lieutenants, with his ferocious mustaches, a kerchief on his head, an earring in one ear; Louis Chighizola, better known as Nez Coupé, since he had no nose on his scarred face; and Rene Beluchi, fierce-looking and swarthy, a man whose appearance inspired fear.

They had worked all night in Andre Villeré's garden, carefully cutting turf into squares and laying it aside, then digging a hole in which they

lowered boxes of ammunition. The hole was filled in, and carefully recovered. In a few days, the grass would grow together smoothly, and there would be no sign that war materials lay buried beneath a peacefully blooming tree.

Congratulating themselves on their night's work, they were preparing to leave—and this girl had come.

"Who is she?" Beluchi asked.

"Ah, as I said, she is a little bird. But this bird sings loudly, and into Governor Claiborne's ear. It is because of her singing that we were taken to the Cabildo."

Beluchi, not having been present the night Arielle stormed into Andre Villeré's home, eyed the girl nervously.

"What should we do with her?"

"I think we should take her across the bridge," Nez Coupé put in quickly. "Leave her in the cane fields where she will be found. No one will listen to what she says. They will think she dreamed it, since she is so hurt. She herself might think that."

"Don't be a fool," Gambi spat. "We will take her. A singing bird named Marquez? Ho! Laffite will be pleased. I will take the responsibility."

"You must make no more mistakes," Beluchi reminded him. "There's the matter of that American merchantman you sank a short time ago. Laffite is none too happy with you at the moment."

"Pahl!" Gambi spat. "He wants to be thought of as a business man. I am a pirate, you are pirates. Why be liars and hypocrites?"

"I still say we should let her go," Nez Coupé persisted.

"And I say we must take her with us—or kill

her." Gambi whipped his knife from his belt and drew a thin red line across the throat of the unconscious girl.

"No," shouted Nez Coupé.

"Wait," Beluchi roared. "We'll take her."

"Good," Gambi grunted. He slid the knife back into its resting place and ran his free hand over the curves of Arielle's limp body. "It would have been a frightful waste."

Dawn rose over Villeré-in-the-Swamp and deepened into morning. When Arielle didn't appear for breakfast, someone recalled she'd gone to bed early the previous night, complaining of fatigue. The general consensus was that she was sleeping soundly.

When several more hours had passed and she was still absent, Madam Villeré sent Blanche to see if the girl were ill. Blanche returned to report that Arielle was not in her room. Her night-things were tossed over the foot of the bed, so apparently she had dressed and gone out for a walk.

It was not unusual. She had done it before. No one was unduly alarmed, except for Luisa, whose eyes began to fill with a growing fear.

By late afternoon, the Villeré plantation was in a panic. Arielle was gone. No one had seen her go. The slaves, pulled from the fields, were scattered in search. Madam Villeré called Hawkins into her study, and made him swear he hadn't touched the girl. Despite his loose lips and evasive eyes, she felt he wasn't lying.

Luisa fled to old Teeny for a find-something charm. Thaddeus Lindenwood paced the floor, his white hair flying as he beat his breast and agonized theatrically—and sincerely.

Mindy and Coaley looked at each other, seeing the same thought dawning in the other's eyes. They'd helped to search the cane fields and the cemetery, but there was another place—

They slipped from the house and, hand in hand, made their way to their tree-cave, certain they'd find her there. The cavern was empty, and Mindy began to cry.

"We've looked everyplace," she sobbed. "She's dead or something, I know it! Maybe she fell in the bayou and drowned."

Coaley, suffering for his friend and not knowing how to cope with her tears, shifted from one foot to another. Then his face lit up in a dazzling smile.

"Sump'n we ain't tried yet. Let's git us a which-away bug!"

Drying her eyes on her pinafore, Mindy followed Coaley to the garden, where he searched diligently, finally coming up with a bug between thumb and forefinger. "Ask it," he said.

They followed the direction of the pointed tail, passing the laundry cabin, and the next. Coaley stopped, perplexed, then began to backtrack slowly. At the narrow way between the two cabins, the tail stood straight up.

"I think it say us oughta go in there," Coaley said, eyeing the dark aperture a little fearfully.

The two children went inside, Coaley discovering the molasses keg. "Looky here. Here's sumpin' we can use for our house."

Mindy tripped on an article he'd stepped over. She picked it up. "And here's something else. A candlestick. It's heavy," she frowned, "and it isn't busted. Wonder why somebody threw it away?"

"Dunno," Coaley said, more interested in the keg which he began to roll toward the opening.

"Might as well git this stuff out. Yo' sis sho' ain't here."

Leaving the shadows for the dim light of early evening, Mindy gave a startled exclamation. "This candlestick is from Arielle's room. I know, 'cause I spilled bluing on it when I was writing a letter. See how blue it is at the bottom?"

"Look at the other end," Coaley said in a strangled voice. "What's that?"

Mindy looked, her face paling beneath her freckles. One end of the candlestick was blue, the other covered with a red-brown substance. She touched a finger to it, and something came away to coil around her finger. A strand of long, dark, silken hair.

Exchanging a wild look, Mindy and Coaley ran for the house.

A stricken group of people viewed the evidence. It would appear that Arielle had been struck down by some unknown enemy and her body dragged away. In this deep swamp country, she might never be found.

Luisa promptly went into hysterics, and Madam Villeré sent for Blanche to take her to her room. She also dispatched a messenger to Ramon, asking him to come and aid in the search for his wife. Her duties done, her own self-control began to crumble. She had been truly fond of the girl—

It was Lindenwood who brought her back to her senses. He sat in a big chair, holding Mindy, comforting the child. "Arielle never hurt anyone in her life," he said in a thin voice, unlike his own. "Why would anyone hurt her?"

*Laffite*, Madam Villeré thought instantly. Because of Arielle's information, *Laffite* and some of his men had been imprisoned in the Cabildo—and

now they were free. It was a clear case of retaliation.

She leaned over Mindy, shaking the little girl until her sobbing ceased, and she looked up at her with swollen eyes. "Mindy, you brought us what you found, but where did you find it? Think! Near the bridge! The cane fields? Tell me!"

Her decisive tone brought Mindy back to the present. "Back of the laundry cabin," she whispered. "By a keg that was under the window."

Madam Villeré stared at the child, open-mouthed. Then Arielle had *seen*. And someone had caught her at it! Bathilde? Had Hawkins lied? Not Laffite's men, then, but—someone! And thank God for it! If Arielle had gone to Ramon with what she had seen—. But someone had saved her. Thank God! Oh, thank God!

The ache that had niggled in her breast began to unfold like a bud, blooming into a crimson flower of pain. "Call Blanche," she managed, calmly. Then, her face ashen, she crumpled to the floor.

Long before Ramon arrived from New Orleans, word had spread like wildfire through the slave quarters. Ole Missus was in a bad way, tuk with some kind of fit. Junie, like Sukie, had "run off to the swamps." And young Missie was gone, but mebbe somebody kilt her first. The debbil done tuk over this place, for sho'!



## Chapter 6

Arielle had no recollection of being placed in a pirogue or of crossing the Mississippi. The blow she had suffered, together with the horrors she'd witnessed, sent her into a hazy nightmare from which she did not wake until late afternoon. She opened her eyes to a world that was green and misty blue; the tall grasses of the swamps, higher than a man's head, blended with the sky. She had a feeling of instability, of floating—

Then she saw Gambi silhouetted against the background, wiry muscles bulging as he handled a pole. Behind him sat Beluchi, oars shipped and waiting for an emergence into deeper water. Her memory returned with horrifying suddenness, along with the knowledge that her hands and feet were bound, and that her head rested against a man's rank-smelling shirt.

With a small cry, she tried to twist away, but lean arms held her fast. She looked up into the villainous face of the man without a nose. Her heart stopped for a moment, frozen in fear and revulsion, then began pounding at a rate that turned her faint.

"Easy, Miss," her captor's voice cautioned. "Didn't mean to scare you. Old Nez Coupé ain't easy to look at, but he's harmless, 'fore God! Got a wife and some daughters of my own," he added, boastfully.

"Please," she whispered, "let me sit up."

Obediently, he lifted her into a sitting position where she swayed for a moment, trying to regain her senses. "Where am I? How did I get here?" Then, her voice trembling, "Where are you taking me?"

Memories flooded back as he answered her questions, telling how she'd shown up at Andre Villeré's place, her head injured and bleeding, at a most inopportune time. There had been nothing for it but to bring her along. And they were heading for Grande Terre, the headquarters of Jean Laffite.

Thoughts of her present predicament faded away, the horror of the scene in the laundry room filling her mind. Little Junie, crouched on her pallet like a frightened wood's creature; Madam Villeré wielding her whip. For certain, that was the way Cleone died—and now Junie was probably dying too, with no one to help her—at the hands of a mad woman. And all because Arielle had intervened.

Arielle began to cry weak, hopeless tears of grief. Nez Coupé was clearly at a loss before her tears. "A-w-w," he kept saying, "don't do that! Easy, girl. It will be all right. Laffite won't harm you..He's a gentleman—like I am—"

The flat-bottomed boat had moved into a small

lake, floating free of the encumbering swamp growth. Gambi laid his pole down and turned his attention to Nez Coupé and the girl.

"Awake, is she? Then I'll take over, old man. Gambi knows how to dry a lady's tears." Leering, he started to make his way toward her, but Beluchi stood, blocking his way. The two men stood for a moment, eye to eye, then Gambi shrugged and sat down.

"Have it your way," he growled. "But she's my prize. I took her."

"Laffite divides the spoils," Beluchi reminded him.

Gambi made an ugly sound and spat into the water. He said nothing more, but did not take his eyes off Arielle until he was forced to rise to take the pole once more.

Nez Coupé relaxed the protective arm he'd placed around Arielle's shoulders. "A bad one, him," he admitted. "But we will watch over you, Beluchi and me."

Arielle didn't hear him. Her shocked mind was filled with Gambi's words—*She's my prize*, and Beluchi's—*Laffite divides the spoils*.

Laffite, her arch-enemy! Laffite, who was responsible for her mother's death! Laffite, who had reason to punish her. Did he know she'd been responsible for his capture and arrest?

Would he give her to Gambi? Or, ah God—worse, would he share her among these men?

She would have to find some way to escape. If she could make her way back to Villeré-in-the-Swamp, she would tell Thaddeus Lindenwood her story. They would take Mindy and flee.

If she didn't find a way back, if she died out here in the swamp with its winding waterlanes, it

would still be preferable to a living death on Grande Terre.

She stiffened her shoulders. "My hands are bound too tightly," she said.

Nez Coupé moved swiftly to untie them. Then he removed the bonds from her ankles. "I do not see that these are needed. You cannot run away. But should you think of it, I must tell you these swamps are filled with dangerous creatures, snakes, gators—escaped slaves who have gone insane. It would not be pleasant for a white girl to fall into such hands."

He illustrated his point with tales of obscenities and butcheries that made her shudder. And the improbability of making her way back to Mindy grew on her as she studied her surroundings. It was impossible to tell where the water ended and land began. Her captors seemed to know their route by instinct. Occasionally the winding waterlanes emerged into placid lakes of strange ethereal beauty. Wildlife abounded; herons, egrets, the brown pelican. And sometimes the pirogue seemed to be floating in a sea of flowers. Over it all, the dying sun shed an opalescent light.

Gambi used his pole to lift an enormous, swimming snake, tossing it into the reeds. At one point, the trail of a heavy crawling beast showed in the mud shallows. Beyond, the grasses shook, parting at its passage, coming together once more.

And always, Gambi watched her, his eyes burning through to the flesh beneath her rumpled gown. Seeing Arielle shiver, Nez Coupé gallantly gave her his coat. It smelled of sweat and of the grave, due to his digging operations of the night before, but she accepted it gladly. She wasn't cold, but it seemed an extra protection against Gambi's leering eyes.

Leaning against the side of the boat, Arielle

rested her head on folded arms and pondered her plight. Nez Coupé seemed nice enough. Maybe she could bribe him to help her—tell him Ramon would pay a great deal of money for her return. Beluchi? He had stopped Gambi's advance, earlier, but had he done it for her sake—or because he expected a share of the spoils? Another tremor ran through her and she quelled it. She could not trust any one of them.

Her days of trusting were over.

She thought of Mindy at Villeré-in-the-Swamp with no protection except that of an aging old innocent, and a little black boy. What if Madam Villeré vented one of her insane rages on her little sister? Or, even worse—oh God! Hawkins had an eye for young girls! If he molested the child, and her mother-in-law had to choose between dismissing her overseer and Mindy's safety, what course would she take?

How she wished she had gone to Thaddeus Lindenwood with her story. At least, he would be alerted to danger. Luisa, of course, loved Mindy. But the girl would do anything to please her mother.

Ramon? Arielle felt, instinctively, that he didn't know of his mother's cruelty. He believed in her, implicitly. It was Jim Davis who had beaten Cleone to death. Sukey ran away. Most probably, she would say that Junie ran away, too, if the child didn't survive the whipping.

Arielle couldn't blame Ramon. Smothered by affection, bound by ties of loyalty, she, too, had been blind to the woman's true nature. And because of it, she'd believed Jim Davis capable of murder. Jim and April, driven from the home they loved,

where they hoped their child would be born. If only they were still there, she wouldn't be so afraid for Mindy.

When she finally lifted her tear-wet face, night had fallen. The pirogue had entered a lake, smooth as glass. Its dark surface reflected the stars, and the oars splashed silver as they dipped and rose.

They were headed toward a *chênière*, an island of shell, and soon the boat grated against its shore. Nez Coupé helped Arielle from the vessel. She was stiff, aching all over, her gown and petticoat hems sodden with water from the bottom of the pirogue.

The sinister-looking little man led her to a spot beneath a giant liveoak, where he seated her after carefully scanning the spot for reptiles. Then he went to gather Spanish moss to make a bed for her, while the others built up a fire and began to prepare a meal.

Beluchi brought her a tin of hot water. Tearing a piece from her petticoats, she bathed her face, glad to be rid of the dried blood that streaked it. Thank heaven the bleeding had stopped.

Later he came with a cup of gumbo, waiting as she downed the hot mixture. Uncomfortably, she realized it was his own utensil, and he would eat only after she was done with it. She finished hurriedly, though it burned her throat.

Then the fearsome-looking man spoke in a surprisingly gentle voice. "Do not be afraid. We will look after you. And do not try to escape. You will receive fair treatment at Laffite's hands."

Fair treatment from a buccaneer? Hardly! She forced herself to smile in thanks. As for escaping, she'd given up that notion for the moment. Her head still reeled, and she was too stiff to run. She

must try to make herself rest and regain her strength, though every mile closer to Grande Terre took her farther from Mindy.

The bed of moss was not unpleasant. She lay back and tried to sleep, extremely conscious that a bottle was being passed among the group at the fire. Voices raised in drunken camaraderie as they began to talk of ships they'd sunk, treasures they'd looted. And finally, they began to boast of the women they'd had. Hearing their accounts that ranged from tales of prostitutes they'd known to violent rape, Arielle lay tense and terrified. Sober, Nez Coupé and Beluchi promised to protect her. But what if now—

Her fears didn't ease until they went to their beds at the far side of the fire and the noise of masculine snoring filled the night air. Then even that stilled, and the only sound was the soft cry of a small owl, high in the tree above her bed. She drifted into sleep.

Gambi lay on his back beneath the stars, a smug smile on his battered face. It was clear the others were dead to the world. He could always hold his liquor better than any man he knew. This time it had stood him in good stead. To him, women were only good for one thing. And he intended to have a taste of it with this one before they reached Grande Terre. After all, she was his. He'd caught her, hadn't he? But that sonofabitch Laffite wouldn't recognize that fact. Some day he, Gambi, would be sitting in Laffite's place—and the privateering operations would be handled as they should be. He had some backers. Maybe he should make his move soon. But in the meantime, he had something more pleasurable to attend to.

Grinning evilly, he inched from his moss bed

and made a wide circle around the fire. Kneeling beside Arielle, his dirty bandana in his hand, thoughts of Laffite fled his mind. God, she was beautiful! The moonlight on her sleeping face made her look like a virgin. That, of course, was too much to hope for, since the lady had a husband.

When he got through with her, he thought wickedly, she'd throw her husband back. He might be a small man, but no one could top his sexual prowess. Besides, he knew a few little tricks that would make the lady scream with delight.

First, though, he must make her just scream—

He grinned and leaned over her, placing a hand on her breast. Arielle's eyes flew open to see his evil face close to her own. Fear forced a whimper from her throat, then she opened her mouth to scream for help.

With a single motion, he stuffed the wadded kerchief between her parted lips. She writhed, choking, as he lowered his body on hers, and she felt the fingers that clawed at the bodice of her gown, the roughness of his beard against her breast. He moved slightly to lift her skirts, and with an agility brought on by desperation, she brought her knee up, hard.

His breath went out on a gagging sound. "Damn you," he howled when he could find his voice. "Damn little bitch!" In his pain and nausea, he'd forgotten the need for silence. He swung a fist at her, and she took the blow on an upraised arm. He drew back again, then stopped as his name was spoken.

"Gambil"

Nez Coupé and Beluchi stood behind him, their knives in their hands. He rose to face them, prepared to bluff, pulling his own knife from his waistband. For a moment they circled each other, stiff-



legged and wary as wild animals. Then Gambi swore, thrust his knife in his belt, and limped back to his bed.

The other two remained, looking down at Arielle. She pulled the gag from her mouth and tried to cover herself with her hands, sensing further danger. Then Beluchi sighed, turned his back, and returned to his own moss pallet. Nez Coupé pulled off his ragged shirt, tossed it to her, and returned to build up the fire.

He remained there all night. And Arielle, exhausted, feeling somehow secure under the noseless man's watchful eye, finally slept.

She dreamed of Cleone's bruised face, of Junie's frail body shuddering under the whip, of Mindy, her small face smudged with tears.

## Chapter 7

Mindy's tears were dry now. The little girl was bewildered and angry. After the initial search, no further effort had been made to find Arielle. The messenger sent for Ramon had returned with the news that he was on a mission. He'd left word that Ramon be told upon arrival.

Luisa, Blanche, and Shug were closeted with Madam Villeré, said to be on her deathbed. Thaddeus Lindenwood was ill from shock. Hawkins sent the slaves about their appointed tasks. He would not institute a search without orders from his mistress, who was unable to give them. He'd picked himself a new girl, Trill. He had his own business to tend to.

If no one else would look for Arielle, Mindy would. And she intended to find her.

She and Coaley spent a blood-chilling day probing the bayou in the vicinity of the house with

a sapling pole. "Think I got her," Coaley would say, his black skin taking on an ashen look. The two of them would heave and pry, finally lifting a dripping root or some other swamp debris.

They searched the graveyard, eyeing the heavy mausoleum doors with trepidation. The cane fields could be ruled out, since the slaves were constantly at their hoeing. If Arielle were there, she would have been found. But there was the sugar mill. But a search of its ghostly, unoccupied interior turned up nothing.

"Maybe Hawkins got her," Mindy suggested.

They went to his house while he was away. A swollen-faced Trill answered the door, shaking her head to all their questions. Finally she burst into tears and told them to go away, and, please, not to come back.

It was Coaley who found the first clue. A riderless horse had come home the morning Arielle disappeared, with blood all over its mane. "Put him in the stall the night befo' mahse'f," the stableboy asserted. "Nuthin' human coulda got him out without my seein'. Reckin' it was the debbil hisse'f what spirit that horse away."

"I'll bet it was Arielle," Mindy said. "Maybe Hawkins or somebody hurt her, and she ran off! Maybe she's just hidin'. And, Coaley, I'll bet I know where!"

It would be a long walk to the fairy-tale house Luisa had shown them. Coaley demurred until Mindy slipped into the kitchen and filched some cold fried chicken and some chunks of gingerbread. She used the food as bait. After they'd searched for Arie, they'd eat, and not until then.

The small boy began to get nervous as they approached the bridge. Miss Luisa had said they

should never come here alone. Maybe something awful lived in that house, something that didn't like children—

"Don't be a nincompoop," Mindy said briskly. But she, too, was beginning to be frightened. She rubbed at the goose pimples that covered her arms despite the heat of the day, and found herself tiptoeing across the bridge, so that their approach would not be heard.

The house lay before them; the sunlight pooled on its faded tiles and touched a flowering tree beyond the garden wall, setting it aquiver with translucent bloom.

"See," Mindy said stoutly. "Nothing to be a-scared of. We'll just walk up to the front door, and ask if whoever lives here has seen Arie." Displaying more courage than she felt, she marched ahead. Coaley followed her despite the fact that his small black knees were knocking together.

Mindy knocked at the door. There was no answer. She knocked again, then, disappointed, turned away. "Guess there's nobody home," she said. "Maybe we better—." She stopped short, catching sight of something on the ground. She picked it up, studying it, her eyes filling. "This is Arie's, Coaley. A button off her gown. The one she had on the night before she was—gone. She's here, Coaley! Maybe—," her eyes widened, "—maybe she's a prisoner! Maybe she's all tied up and locked in a room."

Coaley guessed what was coming. He backed a couple of steps. "Us needs some he'p," he said, his eyes rolling. "Us better go git Miss Luisa—"

"Luisa!" Mindy scoffed. "All she does is sit with her mama and cry. You think she'd be any good? Come on!"

She pushed open the garden gate and crossed

to the house. All entrances were locked—until she tried the French doors. One slid open, and she entered; Coaley followed, frightened out of his wits but buoyed up by her determination.

Hand in hand, they wandered through the deserted house, afraid to even speak in the echoing rooms. They searched closets, armoires, beneath the beds. Finally Coaley, from sheer nerves, began to sniffle.

Mindy put her arm around him, comfortingly. "It's all right. She's not here. Nobody's here. Tell you what, let's go out and have our lunch in the garden." Anxious to leave the empty, forbidden house, he readily agreed.

Outside, they blinked in the sun. "We'll eat here," Mindy said. Then, "No, I have a better idea. Let's go around back."

They followed a small path made of crushed shell that led through a bower of bloom, Mindy looking about for the perfect spot for their picnic. Suddenly she froze.

"Coaley, look! That looks like a—a grave!"

The boy could no longer control his shivering. His teeth were clicking like castanets as he stared at the place Mindy indicated. Beneath a flowering tree, the earth was mounded a little. The grass that covered the mound had been carefully cut and replaced. Mindy went forward and grasped a bit of turf. It came up with her hand. She turned to Coaley. "We've got to find some shovels—"

"Oh, lawdy," he moaned. "Don' make me do it, Mindy. I jus' cain't!"

By sheer force of will, she prevailed upon him. They found a shovel and a hoe in a small open shed and, carefully setting the turf aside, began to dig.

It was early twilight when Mindy's shovel grated on something solid. The sound sent Coaley into another spasm of fear. "We gotta git some he'p," he moaned. Mindy ignored him. Working frantically, she finally uncovered a small coffin-like box.

"She ain't in that," Coaley whispered. "Not less-en they cut her laigs off—"

"Coaley!" Her cry of outrage and grief silenced him. It was a pair of horrified children who crawled into the hole at the day's dim parting. The lid to the box lifted easily, but it was some moments before either child opened screwed-shut eyes.

"Nothing," Mindy said, elated and disappointed at the same time. "It's not Arie, Coaley. Just a bunch of old guns and stuff." She closed the box, and they climbed from the hole to sit, panting, on the edge of it. Finally, Mindy rubbed a weary arm across her dirt-smeared face. "Now, we've got to put it all back like it was, so's nobody will know."

"Do we has to?"

She looked at him sternly. "We're not s'posed to be here. You want somebody to come over and tell Ol' Missus we've been poking around?"

Sighing, he stood and closed newly blistered fingers about the hoe handle.

They finished their job by moonlight and went home in the darkness, clinging to each other for protection against night-horrors. They found the house in an uproar. Ramon had come. They had been missed. A search party was being organized to go look for them. Luisa was beside herself. Where had they been?

Mindy looked at Coaley. He was filthy, covered with dirt. She probably looked worse. "Digging for buried treasure," she improvised. Then, as Coaley

opened his mouth, she added hastily, "But we didn't find any. And, honest, Aunt Luisa, we didn't know it was so late—"

"Didn't know it was so late! When you haven't eaten since breakfast?" Luisa was outraged.

Head hanging, Mindy confessed to filching the food from the kitchen. It hadn't been eaten, having somehow gotten shoveled into the hole in the darkness, but it sounded more plausible. Coaley gave her a mournful look as he was shooed to his bed in the quarters. Mindy, firmly guided upstairs to bath and bed, didn't blame him. Her stomach was growling too.

Before she got into her bath, Mindy surreptitiously took the button from her pocket and hid it in a small box of her own personal treasures; shells, baby teeth, a ring that had been her mother's. Tomorrow, she would go through Arielle's things to see if the dress it came from was there.

Luisa fussed over the child, tucking her in with a goodnight kiss, then gathered the dirty clothing into a pile. She was glad for something to do. It kept her from thinking. Finally there was nothing left to accomplish. She left the room, and met Ramon coming from his mother's chambers. He fell in beside her, and they went downstairs.

"She doesn't look well, does she?" he asked.

Her mother looked better than Ramon, was Luisa's private opinion. His face was gaunt. There were black circles under his eyes. "I think she's much improved," she said carefully. "Of course she can't walk yet, but her speech is better. At least, she's going to live."

"Do you think Arielle is dead?"

She had a private opinion on that, too, but she only said, "I don't know."

"It seems odd to me," he said moodily, "that there have been so many disappearances. Sukey; Junie—and now, my wife. Luisa, do you think there's any connection?"

To his surprise, she burst into tears. Dear God, yes, there was a connection! Mama had killed Cleone, Junie—and for all she herself, knew, she had done away with Arielle! And it was her fault! She had gone to Arielle's room, suggested she watch from the window—to ease her own conscience. Apparently Mama had caught Arielle spying and from there on, Luisa could only guess at what had happened.

Ramon moved to put an arm around his half-sister, his eyes troubled. "What is it, Luisa?" he wanted to know.

"Nothing," she wept. "Nothing at all." If she told him what she knew or guessed, he wouldn't believe her anyway. And now, for the first time in her life, Luisa was in her mother's good graces.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I know it's been hard for you. Mamacita sick, and now this thing with Arielle. Luisa, pray that nothing is really wrong. I can't go on without her."

Luisa pulled away from his brotherly embrace. "Without whom?" she asked acidly. "Your mother or your wife?"

His face reddened. "I suppose I was thinking of Mama," he admitted. "She makes the plans. I only carry them out. If this country returns to Spanish rule, she will be the one who should receive the credit. She's got to live to see her dream come true."

Luisa turned away. "*Her* dream, you said. Not yours. Don't you have any will of your own?"

"Of course I do," he said, his voice angry.

"Then it's your will to be a traitor to your



country, your friends? To spy, and—lie? If you go ahead with your plans to help the British, don't you know that people like—like Louis Daumont—may be killed? Don't you care?"

Ramon Marquez swallowed his fury at the mention of Daumont's name, knowing his sister's attraction to the man. Nothing could ever come of it, poor girl. "Our views on what's right and what's wrong differ," he said soberly. "But for Mamacita's sake, let's not argue. It is very important at this time to keep her happy."

"I know," Luisa said, a note of hysteria underlying her words. "I know. The day she became ill, when I thought she was dying, I made her a promise—"

She stopped, hand to her lips for a moment, then went on. "I promised her I'd marry Edward Allingham."

"Have—have you set a date?"

She shook her head. "Not now. She needs me now. Maybe I can postpone it for a year. Oh God, I wish it could be a hundred!"

He put his arms around her, consoling her. He had no liking for Allingham, but it would be well to see Luisa married and safe from Daumont's advances. There was always a possibility that Luisa, in switching her loyalties, might say too much.

Still, he was sorry, though he knew now that it was possible to marry without love, and that a deep abiding affection could grow from such a union.

"Luisa," he said brokenly, "I miss Arielle. I miss my wife!"

And it was Luisa's turn to comfort him.

## Chapter 8

Ramon's burst of grief had surprised him. As he prepared for bed, he forced himself to admit the truth of it. Coming home to find his mother ill, Arielle believed dead, Mindy and Coaley out of pocket, and the house in turmoil, he hadn't had time to face his own feelings.

He still couldn't believe Arielle was gone, but there was a hurting in his chest at the thought. He needed her gentleness, her quiet understanding. *Dios!* Why did everything he loved have to die—

Pulling a cloak over his nightclothes, he went down the service stairs and out into the night. This was what they said she must have done. But what was her reason?

Standing in the soft night, breathing in the scent of flowers, he realized that this was reason enough. He could visualize her here, face rapt in the

moonlight. And all the while, someone was creeping up on her with murderous intent.

He frowned, trying to make sense of the little he knew. The weapon—the candestick—had been identified as coming from Arielle's room. The accepted theory was that she had used it to light her way down the stairs, that her attacker had wrested it from her, striking her. But Arielle was not afraid of the dark. Now if it had been Luisa—

He stopped his thoughts with a small, impatient gesture. It didn't matter how the weapon got into the intruder's hands, or that it had been tossed behind the laundry cabin for Mindy and Coaley to discover. The major question was—who would hurt Arielle, and why?

Luisa said his mother had hinted that Laffite might be involved, that it was an act of vengeance because the girl informed on him, causing his subsequent arrest. His mother's theory did not hold water. It was unlikely that Laffite knew who it was that had informed on him. And even if by some remote chance he had learned that it was Arielle, he would not have retaliated. Laffite was no gentleman; but neither was it his way to make war against women.

More probably, it was someone else who had attacked Arielle. Perhaps a crazed slave, escaped from some other plantation, hiding in the swamps as they so often did. He wondered, uneasily, if the disappearance of Sukey and Junie might be traced to the same source.

He flinched and turned at a tall shadow, moon-cast across the grass, his voice filling with relief as he said, "Ah, Lindenwood. You, too, cannot sleep?"

The old actor looked at him, his mouth twitching painfully in a gray face. "It is a riddle, you

know. I think by coming here, as she did, I may solve it. Though it cannot bring her back to us."

Ramon laid a hand on his shoulder. "You are not well, sir. And you shouldn't be out in the night air. I suggest you try to forget what has happened for tonight, and get some rest."

Head down, Lindenwood moved numbly toward the service stairs, turning as he reached the door. "*Everyone can master a grief, but he that hath it,*" he quoted hollowly. Then he went inside.

Ramon, standing in the moonlight, thought of Arielle—of Cleone. Finally he made his way up to bed. Tomorrow, he would institute another search, though he was certain nothing would come of it. Then he must return to New Orleans. He had pleaded with his mother that the family return with him. After all, in the city she would have medical advice. She had been adamant in her refusal.

He faced a dilemma, caught between his work in New Orleans, and concern over his family and the plantation. His mother was unable now to handle plantation affairs as she'd done for so long. In his absence, it would become the responsibility of Hawkins, the overseer.

His mother had faith in the man. He would talk to him, tell him he had a free hand—and entrust him with his family's protection.

Reaching his room, he prepared for bed once more. Then feeling the need of Arielle's reassurance, he went through the small dressing room and into her chamber where the big bed stood behind its veil of netting. She would be there, he thought, his mouth dry as he drew the netting aside. She had to be.

The coverlet was turned back in readiness, her gown thrown across the foot, but Arielle's pillow

was untouched. He closed his eyes, imagining the dark hair spread across it; the sleeping face, soft with a child's innocence.

He put his own face against her pillow and wept. Please God, let him find her alive. Let him see his Arielle again—

But if Ramon had seen his wife as she was now, he might not have recognized her. Arielle's torn bodice had been replaced by Nez Coupé's ragged shirt. Of red knit, with white stripes circling it, it was strained across the bosom in a way that made even the shy monster Beluchi cast furtive glances.

Arielle did not care. The humiliation of the night before—especially after listening to their drunken tales of the women they'd had—had ignited a slow anger.

Where had they gotten the idea that a woman was something to be used? Or that rape was a thing that pleased? Catching Beluchi's eyes on her jutting bosom, she had to restrain an impulse to stare lasciviously at his manhood. It would probably frighten him out of the boat!

A woman was human, not a—a *thing*. "I am a person," she told herself. "And I'm also a woman, and proud of it!" After all the men she'd known were not so great. Her mother's husbands; Henri Lanier, dissipated, under Cora's thumb. Ramon, an impotent Mama's boy. Andre—

Remembering the surge of passion that melted her bones at his touch, she put him from her mind. After all, she knew nothing about him—except that he was somehow allied with these men.

She had no idea that the change in her made her even more desirable. Gone were the soft features of girlhood. The skin over her cheekbones was

taut, and a burning blue fire in her tip-tilted eyes seemed to offer a challenge to any man.

I've got to plan carefully, she told herself. First, she would try to get hold of a weapon. Her eyes went speculatively to the knife at Gambi's belt.

They would arrive at Grande Terre sometime tomorrow. If she escaped at all, it must be tonight. She must watch for every opening, use every trick—yes, even her body, if she must, in order to get back to Mindy.

Then, she thought, eyes narrowed, things would change. She had something to hold over Madam Villeré's head now. And she would use it. No more the obedient daughter-in-law, she would improve things for the slaves. Shorter work hours. Hawkins must go.

These men seemed to find her desirable. Well, she would work at seducing her husband. There might be some hope for a normal life, after all—

A giant butterfly came from nowhere, lighting on Gambi's shoulder, its velvet wings palpitating. He grinned and swiped at it, crushing it in his hand.

Arielle tasted the bitterness of nausea. She would kill him, if she could. But first, she must get hold of a knife.

Her opportunity came that night. Pretending to be housewifely and docile, her eyes downcast, Arielle offered to prepare the evening meal. Gambi sat nearby on a fallen log, whittling kindling for the fire while the others went to gather moss from the few trees on the low, water-logged island. The others walked away, and he put down his knife and came toward her.

"Just talking," he sang out, seeing Nez Coupé and Beluchi pause and look back. "No harm in that. Just giving the little lady a hand with the fire."

Seemingly satisfied, they went on.

Arielle, trying to fan the damp wood into flame, felt his hot breath on the back of her neck. "Look," he said, breathing heavily, "Old Gambi's got something for you. You'll be crazy for it once you give it a try. Come on, sweetheart."

He gripped her hand and pressed it against himself.

Arielle rose, jerking free, and backed from him. He followed. "Don't come all high and mighty with me. If you're counting on Laffite, don't! He's on the way down, and I'm on the way up. When I'm filling his shoes, you'll be glad you're Gambi's woman. For more reasons than one," he added significantly.

"I—I don't understand," Arielle said, still backing. "You are going to take Laffite's place? But how?" She felt the log he'd been whittling on at her heels and tensed.

"Majority rule," he said tersely. "But that doesn't have anything to do with now. Come on—give yourself a treat." He reached out for her, and she whirled, coming up with his knife in her hand, jabbing outward, stabbing into his shoulder.

As quick as a cat, he grabbed her wrist, twisting it until the weapon clattered to the ground. He picked it up, wiping the dirt from it, and looked at her through slitted, angry eyes.

"The kitten has claws," he said, leering. "But she needs some lessons." He pointed the knife at her midriff, slashing upward with a movement that made her flinch. "Next time, go for the belly," he said, coming closer, blood dripping from his shoulder, the weapon still in his hand.

He's going to kill me, Arielle thought, closing her eyes against his livid, twisted features. He's going to kill me—

A shout sounded from the returning men, a pounding of footsteps, Gambi backed off as the others arrived.

"Little bitch grabbed my knife," he growled. "Tried to kill me. Ought to cut her goddam throat."

Forbidding faces turned toward Arielle. She glared back. "He laid his dirty hands on me," she spat. "If I get the chance, I *will* kill him!"

Beluchi bandaged Gambi's wound, and Nez Coupé led Arielle off to her pallet of moss. Tonight, at Gambi's insistence, they'd agreed she would be bound. She was not to be trusted.

Nez Coupé tied her feet securely with heavy cord. Her hands, he bound more loosely. Even if she managed to free them, she couldn't get far. And all the while, he chuckled at the discomfited Gambi's expense. "Must have scared hell out of him, little girl like you fighting back like a man."

For some reason his words added fuel to Arielle's anger. Why shouldn't a woman fight back? Was it more ladylike to endure a man's advances?

Seeing her face close against him, he patted her awkwardly on the shoulder, with what passed for a reassuring smile on his scarred face.

"I will bring you some food after a while. And Beluchi and I will take turns at watch tonight, so you need not worry." His humor got the better of him again, and he wagged his head. "I think Laffite is going to like you."

After he had gone, Arielle considered his last words. Tomorrow, she would question him, try to learn all she could about Laffite before they arrived at Grande Terre. It would be wise to know all there was to know about one's enemy.

There would be no escape tonight. She would have to wait until they got to Grande Terre. Then



she would explore every avenue in order to get away—and home—to Mindy.

At Villeré-in-the-Swamp, Ramon Marquez sat with his head in his hands. A full-scale search had brought no clues to Arielle's disappearance. He'd had the slaves line up abreast and walk over every inch of ground. The bayou was busy with pirogues, men with poles, probing to find some dreadful, water-logged thing.

Luisa, white-faced, sick with her own knowledge of events the night Arielle disappeared, tried to comfort him. "It's why anyone would hurt her that I can't understand," he raged. "She was so delicate, sweet, helpless—"

At the moment, his delicate, sweet, helpless wife lay on a pallet of moss in the shadow of a liveoak tree, bound hand and foot. Despite her condition, she had managed to roll to one side, securing a mussel shell washed there during some previous storm. And lying on her back, she held it in her two hands, thrusting out and upward with it—like a knife.

Fighting like a man was new to her, but she was learning. And if need be, she thought with satisfaction, she could fight like a woman, too.

## Chapter 9

The boat skimmed smoothly across Barataria Bay the next morning, wending its way around small islands barely visible above the waterline. There was no stifling sense of being enclosed here as there had been in the bayous with their tall grasses at either side.

Gambi, freed from duty because of his wound, sat in the stern, never taking his red-rimmed angry eyes from Arielle's face. She'd made a brutal, violent enemy. He would kill her if he had the opportunity.

Beluchi, quiet and shy despite his ugly appearance, sat near Arielle while Nez Coupé took first turn at the oars. She had many questions to ask about Laffite, so she waited impatiently for the garrulous little man to take Beluchi's place.

She had almost despaired of it happening when

Nez Coupé shipped the oars and signaled for the exchange.

As she'd expected, he was eager to talk about Laffite; but what he told her about him came as a great surprise. She'd envisioned him as a composite of her captors, but Nez Coupé insisted that he was of most gentlemanly appearance.

Where did he come from? The small man could only guess. It was said both he and Pierre, his older brother, had served in Napoleon's wars, but he didn't think that was true. Laffite would have been too young. He figured Jean would have been about fourteen during the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution, and most assuredly an aristocrat. He and Pierre probably escaped at that time and came to Louisiana by way of the West Indies.

What was he like? Well, he was more hot-tempered than his brother Pierre, who hadn't been too healthy since a stroke of apoplexy some years ago that had left him cross-eyed. He didn't smile often. He was an expert duelist—

"And a pirate," Arielle had added, bitingly.

Nez Coupé looked hurt. Laffite was not a pirate, but a privateer. He held a letter of marque from Cartagena, a Colombian seaport, that gave him the right to attack and loot Spanish ships wherever he pleased. It was all legal and aboveboard. When New Orleans was under Spanish rule, the citizens could not have existed with the high tariffs imposed by Spain without the availability of Laffite's smuggled goods. In Nez Coupé's eyes, he was a public benefactor.

When the little man returned to his place at the oars, Arielle sat in silence, pondering what she had learned. Nez Coupé had called Laffite a gentleman.

A gentleman who murdered? Who lived like a king on an income from slaves and smuggled goods? Who employed ruffians such as these, to work for him?

Nez Coupé's description had, of course, been colored by his adulation of the man. Arielle would have to see for herself—

As they approached Grande Terre, Nez Coupé left the oars to Beluchi and scrambled back to sit beside the girl. He was eager to point out the landmarks to her, his eyes beaming with pride. And she realized that, to him, it was a homecoming.

The big house belonged to Jean Laffite, he told her. It was furnished like a palace, with the finest of carpets, silver, and crystal. There, next to it, was the warehouse, stocked to the ceiling with articles for sale. Behind that, the barracoon, where the slaves were held until auction.

Those palmetto-thatched huts about the house were the homes of his lieutenants. "There is mine," Nez Coupé boasted. He stood, hoping to see some member of his family. Failing, he sank back in disappointment.

Arielle sat in numbed horror. This was not a small hideaway as she'd thought it would be, but a fortified town. Eyes wide, she looked at the number of ships in the harbor, counting them. Large ones, privateers. Small sloops with bright sails. And on shore there was a beehive of activity. She felt a little faint as she realized she would have to walk among all those men, a prisoner. Her hair was disheveled, down around her shoulders; her arms were scratched and burned from the sun, welts from the stings of insects that infested the lowland, water-sodden coast—

She was thinking like a woman. Remembering her promises to herself, she held her head high.

Two men met the boat and helped to pull it ashore. One, short, heavy-set, his eyes slightly crossed, was soberly dressed. The other was also short and as broad as he was tall. His enormous strength was apparent as he beached the pirogue.

Nez Coupé aided Arielle in alighting from the craft, then performed the introductions with a deep bow. "Madam Ramon Marquez, may I present Pierre Laffite and Dominique You."

"Marquez?" Pierre Laffite's crossed eyes fastened on her face, and Dominique You gave a long low whistle. Then You's gaze moved on to Gambi.

"Did you place the consignment? I see you had trouble." He was looking at Gambi's shoulder, its bandage now bloody.

"The consignment is safe." Nez Coupé drew the two men away and talked to them in whispers. They looked worried at first, but as he continued, Dominique You slapped his knee and began to guffaw.

Gambi was purple with anger. The tale that he'd been stabbed by a woman—with his own knife—would be all over the island before nightfall. He should have challenged Nez Coupé and Beluchi, wrung the girl's neck, and thrown her overboard.

He would do it yet, but not until he'd pleased himself with her.

Nez Coupé strutted back to the group. He had feared You's raging temper, since abducting a girl had not been part of their mission. But You's sense of humor was as much a part of him as his sudden angers, and the joke on Gambi had taken precedence.

They would go to Laffite and tell him they had the Marquez woman, the informer in the Pearl River

fiasco. For now, Nez Coupé would take her to his home, where she might refresh herself.

Arielle watched as Nez Coupé's wife greeted him with emotional affection, wondering what she could find in such a man to love. He had been kind to her, but his mutilated face was a nightmarish sight.

He introduced her, and the woman exclaimed, "Poor thing! Come in! Come in! I will make you a cup of tea."

The house overflowed with children. It was evident Nez Coupé wasn't quite sure which ones were his as the woman shooed them outside. After a cup of the warming liquid, she ejected him from the premises also. He went good-naturedly.

"You will want to make yourself more presentable before meeting Jean," she explained, bringing warm water in a bowl that looked to be pure silver, and a gold, gem-studded brush and comb. The small house was filled with such luxuries, contrasting oddly with the earthen floor.

It dawned on Arielle that the woman had never stopped talking. She extolled Nez Coupé's virtues, then turned to effusive praise of Jean Laffite. Such a handsome man. So scrupulously fair. She must show Arielle her thimble.

It was of gold, and a tale went with it. One midnight, dividing the loot from a Spanish ship among his men, Laffite had two gold doubloons left over. He had smiled and given them to her. Her husband had taken them for safe-keeping, his right, of course, as head of the family, she added apologetically. But Laffite had taken them back, giving them to Dominique You. "Take these to Thiac, the blacksmith," he'd ordered. "And have a gold thimble made for Madam."

The woman laughed as she told the story. She had a warmth about her and Arielle felt herself relax for the first time in days.

It was not to last. A knock at the door brought Pierre Laffite, who had come to escort her to his brother.

Arielle tensed. She was about to face the man she hated most in the world. Still, the tea had warmed her, strengthened her nerves. Her hair was brushed free of Spanish moss, and her face, except for a great bruise, was clean.

As she walked along beside the silent Pierre, she busied herself with memorizing the layout of Grande Terre, noting camouflaged cannon, that could not be seen from the water.

When she escaped, as she intended to do, her knowledge would be of great value to Governor Claiborne.

They mounted steps that led to a wide, covered porch. A hammock hung there, giving it a homey touch. A small table nearby, made of intricate iron lace and topped with glass, held an open leather-bound book, a decanter and goblet of amethyst, filigreed with silver.

It was plain, Arielle thought angrily, that while his men abducted women and plundered ships, their master took his ease.

They entered a large central hall, Arielle falling a little behind her guide, in awe at her surroundings. Glass cabinets of rare dark woods lined the walls. They contained intricately carved models of ships—all flying the pirate's flag.

Brought back to reality by the sight, Arielle's cheeks reddened with remembered anger. One of those vessels, which the owner had been proud enough to enshrine, had rammed the *Rachel*, caus-

ing her mother's death. She would not be intimidated by this house and its contents, nor by the man who ruled Grande Terre. When she met him, she had something to say!

Eyes blind with fury, she didn't look to either side as she hurried to catch up with Pierre. At last they reached a door, padded and studded with gold-headed nails against maroon velvet. Her guide opened it and bowed her in.

The room was lined with shelves of books. To one side was a large globe on a stand. At the far end, a long desk of polished wood was scattered with papers, the high-backed chair behind it turned away, its occupant evidently looking seaward from the window.

Arielle and Pierre stood silent, as the chair turned slowly. Seated in it was a tall man with pale skin, his large dark eyes unreadable as he looked at Arielle, head resting for a moment against the back of his chair. He was clean-shaven except for a beard extending partway down his cheeks, dressed as a conservative gentleman would dress. Young, handsome—

Arielle was standing in the presence of Jean Laffite, buccaneer, smuggler—and murderer.



## Chapter 10

The tall man rose, bowing. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Madam Marquez."

For a moment Arielle couldn't find her voice, then she blurted, "You have the advantage of me, Sir! I cannot say the same in return."

His mouth quirked at her outburst, and he gestured toward a chair. "Will you please be seated?"

"I prefer to stand."

He shrugged. "As you wish. I must speak with my brother for a little. I will not be long. So, with your permission—" He bowed again, and he and Pierre left the room.

Standing in the middle of the elegantly somber room, Arielle shifted from one foot to the other, feeling small and a little foolish. At last she seated herself, trying to get her thoughts in order. Nothing was as she'd expected it to be. It would be easier to

face a ruffian than this cool gentleman with eyes that seemed to see into her mind.

The door opened and Laffite returned. With another bow, he went to his desk with long strides to sit in the high-backed chair. The tips of his fingers touched as he studied her, seemingly waiting for her to speak. Finally he smiled, his rare smile adding to his charm. "I would like to hear your version of what you are doing here, Madam."

"My version! Dear God! My version! I was kidnapped by your pack of damned, murdering thieves! That's my version! Grossly mistreated—taken from my home—"

"Then your home is the plantation of Andre Villeré?" There was irony in his tone. He was playing a game of cat and mouse with her. Her fists clenched.

"It is not. My husband is Ramon Marquez—"

"I am aware of that. Yet you go to another man's home in the middle of the night. Perhaps an affair of the heart?"

Color flared in her cheeks as she thought of the events of the night she had gone for help. This man was Ramon's enemy, and she was Ramon's wife. She had no intention of airing the family's dirty linen—at least not to Laffite. Her reason for appearing at Andre's door was none of his business.

"One of the slaves had disappeared," she lied. "I was looking for her."

"Alone? In the darkness? And I understand you had an injury."

"I fell from my horse," she said grimly.

"My men think you were spying." His words darted at her like a striking snake.

She was on her feet in an instant. "Spying! If I had known those ruffians were there, I wouldn't

have gone near the place! This is all ridiculous! I demand that you return me to my home! At once!"

He shook his head, sadly. "To my mind, you should not have been brought here at all. But since you are here, I am afraid you will have to remain, at least until Claiborne and I manage to settle our differences."

"You're going to hold me as a hostage?"

"Not at all. You will be my honored guest." He smiled again. "My brother's eyes may appear to be damaged, Madam, but his vision is unimpaired, and he is very astute. It is his belief that you have made a mental tally of what you've seen here: gun emplacements, fortifications, the number of ships. So you see, we dare not let you go. You will have the freedom of Grande Terre, though you will be under constant surveillance."

Dear God, why hadn't she been more discreet! Would she ever get home to Mindy? She felt suddenly sick with hopelessness.

Jean Laffite misinterpreted her expression. "You will want for nothing," he said gently. "And you will be safe here. We do not make war on women."

Arielle closed her eyes, seeing a vision of her mother, an enchanted princess dancing on the deck of a fog-bound ship. Then came the wave, and behind it a great hulk, parting the curtain of fog. Laffite's ship. It had been Laffite's ship. She could almost hear the grinding and rending of wood that ensued, and her screams and Mindy's as Mama was swept into the sea—

"You killed my mother," she said.

Laffite leaned forward, shocked at the girl's words. "What the hell—?"

She told him the story of Deidre's death as he

sat, eyes closed, rubbing at a crease that had formed between his brows.

"I knew of the *Rachel* incident. But not the details. I was not aboard. As I recall, Gambi was in command—"

"Do not pass the blame to someone else! It was your ship. And I imagine you've done the same thing, many times over! How many innocent people have you killed, you—you murdering pirate!"

"I am not a pirate, but a privateer," Laffite said tonelessly. "And I am not a ship's captain, but a businessman. I rarely sail on my own vessels." His mouth twisted wryly as he added, "I suffer from an indisposition when on the water. *Mal de mer*. Seasickness."

His expression was slightly pleading, wistful. He looked as though he expected her to smile with him at his unexpected frailty. Arielle held to the back of a chair, as tightly as she had clung to the ship's railing when the great wave came. "It's not enough to do murder on the seas," she raged on, "now you're trying to join with the British in plundering New Orleans!"

His jaw dropped. "Join with the British? I?"

His face bleak with anger, he pulled a silken cord. A slim girl entered, her slenderness clad in a length of cloth, baring one shoulder and twisted in a artful way.

"Tauna, show Madam Marquez to her suite." Then, dark eyes filled with bewilderment and fury, he said, "For your information, Madam, I consider myself an American!"

Her mind still churning with mixed emotions, Arielle followed the girl to a curving carpeted stair. On the floor above, swept with a fragrant sea wind,

the servant opened a door, gesturing for Arielle to enter. Like her chambers at Villeré-in-the-Swamp, the suite consisted of a sitting room, two bedrooms, and a dressing room. But there the resemblance ended. The walls were a misty pearl, the draperies deepening to rose—shell colors. Delicate chairs and couches, covered in white velvet, rested like white-caps on a sea-blue carpeting. An enormous bed, with a coverlet of shell-rose seemed veiled in sea-mist.

Tauna led Arielle into the dressing room. An enameled white tub, rimmed with seashells, and brimming with warm scented water awaited. Arielle looked at it, eyes wet. At this moment, still clad in Nez Coupé's shirt, she would almost sell her soul for a bath.

She dismissed the girl, who said, shyly, "Missie Glogan come soon."

Who was Missie Glogan? And why was she coming? Arielle puzzled over the words, but not for long. Stripping the soiled clothing from her body, she sank into the water with a contented sigh.

For a few long moments, she let her tortured mind go blank, sensing only the luxury of being clean once more. Then, leaving the tub reluctantly, she towed herself dry. Her own ragged garments lay on the floor where she had stepped from them. Over a chair lay a sea-blue robe, as soft to the touch as a cloud.

Loot from a Spanish ship, no doubt, the woman it belonged to, ravished and murdered. She could not wear it! Arielle picked up her mud-splattered gown, Nez Coupé's filthy shirt, and dropped them again. What difference did it make? Everything in this house was built on a foundation of violence and

death. Even the bed she would sleep in was contraband.

She donned the robe and moved to the dressing table. Picking up a sapphire-studded shell brush, she peered into the mirror. The face that stared back at her was a stranger's. Gone was the soft, trusting expression. In its place a look of confidence. Except for the purple-blue bruise on her forehead, Arielle was not at all displeased with what she saw.

Leaving the mirror, she wandered to the window, watching the small boats with their bright sails skim across her view. She could see the pirogue that had brought her here; beached now. Would it remain there until she managed to reach it, perhaps slipping out one dark night? And could she manage it alone?

There was probably no other way to get back to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. And she would have to traverse a maze of waterlanes, lost in grass—

How did the pirates find their way? She smiled, mirthlessly, thinking that here she must use her woman's weapons. Nez Coupé was a talker and a braggart. Perhaps a little wide-eyed admiration for his navigational talents would bear fruit. Bit by bit, she would draw him out until she had a map of sorts in her mind.

But it would take time. Moodily, she conceded that she would be here for a while. She would seem to settle in, being most cooperative, appreciative of the luxuries of Laffite's home. Perhaps the watch the man spoke of would be relaxed, and she'd have the opportunity to escape.

Meanwhile, she would try to get hold of a weapon. A gun, or a knife.

Turning, she eyed the big bed, longingly. The

bath had relaxed her, and now that there was no need to hold up, she felt her weariness. But she dare not sleep—not yet. She was still uncertain as to her fate, in spite of Laffite's assurances. He might decide to dispose of her, permanently. There was little she could do about it if he did, but at least she would face whatever came with her eyes open.

She sat down on a white velvet couch, drawing her feet up under her as she pondered on the mystery of Laffite the pirate; Laffite the man. Murderer, thief, traitor—there was still something gentle about him that reminded her of Ramon.

Ramon. She wondered how he was taking her disappearance. Surely, he would have been called home.

Her head nodded, and with a drowsy moan, she shifted until she lay curled like a kitten, her dark hair swinging over the couch's arm. Her last thoughts were of Ramon as she drifted into sleep.

*She was at Villeré-in-the-Swamp, in the big bed swathed in mosquito netting. And she heard a door open and close. The dressing room door! It would be Ramon.*

*Lying stiff with apprehension, she heard his footsteps come closer, saw his dark silhouette through the veiling, heard his voice—*

*"It's all right, Arielle. There are no more problems. I can be your husband, now—"*

*"No," she moaned. "No—"*

*But he was lying beside her, and there was nothing between them as their bodies touched and his warmth seeped through her. She melted against him, clinging, thirsty for his love—*

*He pushed her from him. "This has been a pleasant interlude, but I do not wish to see you again."*

*It was Andre Villeré's voice, and Andre Villeré's face above her own. They were standing in a field of cane that rustled about them. "Why did you kiss me?" she asked in a puzzled voice.*

*He grinned. "Because you wanted me to."*

*Anger burned in her brain. The knife was in her hand. She struck out with it—and up—*

*Whoosh!*

*The sound of breath violently expelled brought Arielle's eyes open. Dear God, she'd killed him! She'd—*

*But her hands were empty. The figure before her was not Andre Villeré—but a woman. "My God, dearie," she gasped. "I said I'd look after you, but I didn't count on this—"*

*"I'm sorry. I was having a—a bad dream."*

*"I put my stuff in the other room," the woman said, ruefully, "walked in here, and there you were, smiling in your sleep like an angel. Touched you to wake you up, and you damn near decked me. Well, no matter. I'm the Widder Grogan. Jean asked me to keep an eye on you while you're here." She extended a calloused hand, and Arielle took it, gingerly.*

*Tauna's "Missie Glogan," she thought with amusement. Then her face stiffened as she realized this woman was to be her keeper. Laffite had planted her here to guard her like a watchdog. And it soon became apparent that there would be no bribing or coaxing the woman. Her admiration for Laffite was, like Nez Coupé's, boundless.*

*Arielle watched as the widow Grogan threw open wardrobe doors, pointing out exquisite gowns that had been collected and placed there for Arielle's use. All the while she chattered on about Laffite and what a good man he was. Under Laffite's*



rule, a woman didn't have to worry about the future. If her man got killed in his service, his widow was taken care of for the rest of her life.

Turning, she studied Arielle carefully, her flat, sun-baked face wreathing in a smile. "Jean's been low as a snake lately. I figure he needs himself a woman. Dearie, it looks like you came along at just the right time."

## Chapter 11

Arielle's fears at the woman's words were allayed when her evening meal arrived on a tray. Accompanying the tray was a basket of exotic fruits, along with a note of apology. Laffite regretted he could not request her presence at dinner, due to pressing business of his own.

Evidently his need for a woman wasn't desperate. And now that she needn't confront him this evening, she could smile at her worries. Men greatly outnumbered the women on the island, but certainly the king of Grande Terre would have his choice among them. Tauna, for example, was a beautiful girl. He would not have looked twice at someone in her own bruised, bedraggled state.

She was quite wrong in her assumption. In his study below, Jean Laffite gazed moodily out to sea. Gambi had just left. The man had been his usual

fawning self in Laffite's presence, but there was thinly veiled insolence in his attitude—and a flare of something ugly when his request to take the girl for himself was denied.

Politically, Laffite thought wearily, it would be better to let him have her. He had long been aware that Gambi was stirring dissension among his men, that he wanted the position of leadership. The girl was the final straw, and would serve to precipitate matters.

With all his heart, he wished she'd never been brought here. If he had his way, he would return her to her home. But word of her betrayal of his men in the Pearl River incident was widespread among them. They'd never stand for him letting her go free. As if one small, angry girl could do any harm—

He smiled, thinking of the way she'd faced him, a beautiful creature in spite of her absurd costume. Her eyes had blazed with blue fire as she accused him of both murder and treason, and he had suddenly felt the need to give reasons, make excuses, to absolve himself of guilt.

Glumly, he dug at the carpeting with the toe of a gleaming boot. He had not felt like this since he was a child, at Maman's knee. But then, no woman had spoken to him so firmly in these last years. Madam Marquez was no cloying, simpering miss, seeking his attention. No, Madam was a lovely young lady with a mind of her own. And she also spelled trouble for Jean Laffite. Gambi must be watched—for her sake and for his own.

Now he must forget his unwilling guest and set his mind to matters at hand. A small, fast sloop had put in with the news that one of his larger vessels would soon be limping into harbor. Despite the fact

that she'd taken a lot of punishment, she was bringing in a rich haul. Since she was taking in water, the cargo would have to be unloaded tonight. Afterward, there would be an orgy of drinking in celebration, and some sort of discipline must be maintained,

It was not what he would have wished for. He would have far preferred a leisurely dinner at a table set with the finest of plate and crystal. And sitting opposite him, the little lady who intrigued him so.

But it was not to be.

Sighing, Jean Laffite thrust a pistol into his waistband, and left the house, his mind filled with visions of what might have been.

Tauna had seen the ruffian, Gambi, come and go. She disliked and feared the man, knowing that only Laffite's protection saved her from more serious advances than occasional pinches in the hallway. She had listened to the conversation in Laffite's study, applying her ear to the wall in another room. Horrified that the man had designs on the new little missie, she took the tale to Mrs. Grogan. That worthy and garrulous lady immediately informed Arielle, who shuddered at the nearness of her escape.

"Don't worry, dearie," Mrs. Grogan said comfortably. "Jean Laffite looks after his own."

It gave Arielle something to ponder. She was not Laffite's own, and she did not intend to be. But it might be well to court his favor—just a little—to avoid worse. He didn't seem to be the type to force his attentions on a woman, but in case he did—perhaps she could get hold of a knife.

The commotion when the crippled ship docked brought her to the window. Huge bonfires had been

built on the shore, and men were milling like ants, bringing the cargo to land in bales and crates. The leaping flames limned palmetto-thatched huts and scurrying figures; a bizarre scene that might have been set in an alien, less civilized country.

Arielle watched until she could keep her eyes open no longer. Her brief nap had done little to relieve her exhaustion. She made her way to the bed with its sea-mist veils, too tired to care that it was pirate's plunder. Tonight she needn't try to remain alert—Gambi was, she felt sure, a safe distance away from her.

He was, in fact sulking privately in the warehouse. It was stacked to the ceiling with riches, all under the control of that devil, Laffite. And now the richest cargo yet was coming ashore. All hands had turned to, even women and children aiding in the removal of goods from the ship.

Well, let the fools work. Gambi was still smarting at Laffite's treatment of his request. The woman, by all rights, should be his. The thought of her, sleeping in the big house, fueled his anger. His bandaged shoulder had made him the target of much joking after Nez Coupé's story spread. They said he, Gambi, could not handle a slip of a woman!

He would show them! He would show her, the little bitch! When he was in charge here! He scowled as he took another long drink from the bottle in his hand, then went to the door of the warehouse and looked up speculatively toward the house.

Behind the warehouse, the slaves moaned uneasily in the barracoon. A new lot, they were. Maybe a slim little virgin among them. For a brief moment, Gambi wondered who stood guard there.

Someone he could threaten—or bribe? Laffite need never know.

But if it got out, it might be another colossal joke. *Gambi could only handle a woman in chains.* Besides, such an encounter didn't seem to hold its usual appeal to his male urges. He could think of nothing but Arielle and in his drunken condition, he began to view her as a threat to his manhood. When he took over from Laffite, he'd show the girl a thing or two!

Then he thought, why wait?

Stumbling, mumbling to himself, he made his way to the big house. He entered, falling over an umbrella stand made from the foot of an elephant, its nails gilded. The noise brought Tauna into the hall.

She gasped, turning to run, but his hand went out, whirling her to face him.

"Where is the girl?"

When she didn't answer, his hands gripped her throat. He would kill her, he said, unless she told him. Seeing his small eyes, menacing, red with drink, she complied. He drew back his fist and swung at her. She dropped to the floor.

There, she lay quietly as he mounted the stairs. When he'd rounded the curve and was out of sight she put a hand to her jaw. Luckily, it was just a bruise. She got to her feet, trembling a little. Then she ran out into the night to find Laffite.

In the room to which Gambi had been directed, Arielle was sleeping. But it was a troubled sleep. Her earlier dream had returned to haunt her; the dream of being at Villeré-in-the-Swamp, hearing Ramon approach her bedside.

*She heard his footsteps come closer, saw his dark silhouette through the veiling, heard his voice—*

*"Little bitch! Teach you to pull a knife on me!"*

Her eyes flew open. This was no dream. Once again she was lying on a bed of moss, Gambi's hand over her mouth as she tried to fight him away.

"Not this time," he muttered, throwing his body over her in such a way that she couldn't move. "You're not going to knee old Gambi this time! You little she-cat—"

Then there was a dull, thudding sound. He went limp, his weight suffocating. Getting her face free of the rancid-smelling shoulder pressed against it, Arielle drew a shuddering breath, her eyes focusing on Mrs. Grogan, weighing a small but heavy statuette in her hand.

"Took care of the sonofabitch, I did," she said with satisfaction. "You all right, dearie?"

Then the room was filled with people; Laffite, Dominique You, Beluchi, Nez Coupé, Tauna. Gambi was dragged, feet first, through the sea-mist curtains and dumped unceremoniously on the floor. Arielle sat up, eyes wide. "Is he dead?" she asked, finally.

"Unfortunately, no," Jean Laffite poked the unconscious man disdainfully with the toe of his boot. "Take him somewhere to sober up," he told Beluchi. "I will see to him in the morning. Dominique, Nez Coupé, continue with the unloading. Tauna, Mrs. Grogan, I appreciate your assistance. Thank you."

His words dismissed them.

He turned to face Arielle. She shrank back against the pillows, pulling the sheet beneath her chin as she realized she was alone in the room with a man of evil reputation. A slight flicker of his eyes indicated that he sensed her feelings, but he spoke in a decorous manner, apologizing for Gambi's in-

trusion. The man would be punished. Did she wish him whipped?

Whipped? A vision of Madam Villeré flashed before her eyes; the lashing of her weapon like a striking snake, drawing blood that spattered the walls. "No," Arielle said sickly, "Not that. Let him be. But I would like something with which to defend myself if it should happen again—"

Laffite drew his own knife from his belt, a jeweled handle above a slender, vicious blade, and handed it to her. Then he went to the door, turning to assure her that someone would stand watch.

She would need watching, he told himself gloomily as he went down the stairs. For that last look at the girl; blue eyes intense in her pale face, dark hair streaming over bared shoulders as she clutched the sheet to her chin, had almost done him in. For a moment, he cursed the fact that he was but a gentleman privateer. If he were a true pirate, as Claiborne thought, he would take what he wanted.

His charter out of Cartagena—and his conscience—allowed him to plunder and sink the ships of Spain, but they did not give him leave to storm the bastions of one small and lovely defenseless girl.

Defenseless? His mouth curved in a wry smile as he recalled the tirade he'd faced at their first meeting. And he must remember that it was through her interference that he and his men were hauled off to the Cabildo. Too, there was Nez Coupé's tale of the way she stabbed Gambi with his own knife.

He would get the same treatment, he was sure, if he gave in to his desires and returned to her room.

For a space, he almost felt sorry for Gambi;



stabbed by a young lady, struck over the head by an older one. He'd certainly had poor luck with women of late—

Reaching the door, Laffite went out into the direction of the bonfires and the moored ship, where riches beyond belief were being carried ashore. At least these things were tangible. The jewel that lay sleeping in a bedroom of his house was far, very far, from his reach.

Arielle was not asleep. She lay wide-eyed, listening to the sounds from the night, the knife Laffite had given her close at hand. When at last she slept, her dream returned. But now, the man approaching her bed wore, variously, the faces of Ramon Marquez, Andre Villeré—and Jean Laffite.

## Chapter 12

With morning, Arielle forgot the horrors of the night, her concern for Mindy returning. She must concentrate on finding a means of escaping Grande Terre. When—and if—she managed a return to Villeré-in-the-Swamp, she must cope with problems there.

She thought of Ramon, cataloguing what she knew of him. He was handsome, kind, gentle. He was also weak-willed, under the domination of his mother, and—she made herself say the word—*impotent*.

She would use her new found determination to insist he find a home for her and for Mindy in New Orleans. If Madam Villeré didn't like the idea and he chose to go along with her, then she had a weapon. Ramon would go to any length to keep his mother from discovering he wasn't truly a man—

She shut her eyes, imagining the hurt in his soft brown ones when she faced him with such a threat. It would be an ugly thing to do. Blackmail. But she would use it without hesitation to get Mindy away from a place where people did such monstrous things.

She pulled on a simple dark dress, sighing a little. First she must think of the problems that were here and now—

Laffite had said she was a guest here, and that she would have the freedom of the island. She would take advantage of his hospitality to search out every avenue of escape. And while she was at it, she'd memorize *all* fortifications for Governor Claiborne. Perhaps he'd be able to wipe out this hornets' nest.

Mrs. Grogan brought breakfast on a tray, and with it, the news that Arielle must remain in her room. "Just until Jean gets this Gambi mess straightened out, dearie," the woman said chattily. "He's got some of the men stirred up. Telling them Jean's keeping you for himself, that you've got him fooled—you're a spy. Imaginel! A sweet little thing like you!"

Arielle's cheeks flushed, but she said, "Ridiculous!"

"That's what *I* said! Anyway, there's a meeting going on right now, to see how to deal with the man."

In the room below, Laffite had summoned his brother Pierre, Dominique You, Beluchi, Nez Coupé and several others of his more trusted lieutenants. The men were all tired from their strenuous activities of the night before, but it was generally agreed that something must be done about Gambi. The man had risen early, despite the blow he'd suffered,

and had been busy inciting his friends among Lafitte's people to mutiny.

Gambi was sent for and brought before this court of his peers. His face was sullen, black with anger, as he waited to be accused of his attack on Arielle.

Instead, he was to be tried on a charge of piracy. An assault that resulted in the sinking of an American merchantman; the crippling of the *Rachel*.

"I am a pirate," Gambi growled. "Hell, we're all pirates, no matter how you try to pretty it up! Why be a bunch of damn liars and hypocrites?" He looked insolently at Jean Laffite as he spoke.

Laffite's hot temper brought him to his feet. He leaped at Gambi, but Nez Coupé caught his arm. "Gambi was here before any of us," he said. "For God's sake, Jean—"

"Get out," Laffite grated. "But you're not getting off free! I'll let you know what we plan to do with you!" He turned to Nez Coupé. "Do you follow my leadership? Or his?"

"I go with you."

Laffite looked at the others, seeing that they had reached the same decision. "Then understand this," he said harshly, "under my command, no American ship is to ever be attacked by my men. Is that clear?"

They nodded, and he continued. "No American ship—and no American woman. From this time forward, the penalty is death."

Gambi, pausing at the door, turned away and stalked, stiff-legged, out into the hot Louisiana sun.

Laffite leaned back in his chair. Gambi gone, his lieutenants dismissed, he felt oddly ill at ease; whether it was due to Gambi's insolence—or the thought of the woman upstairs, he didn't know. At

last he rang for Tauna. He would be pleased if Madam Marquez would join him on a tour of his holdings.

Arielle accepted. He found it difficult to reconcile the demure young woman who accompanied him with the frightened girl of the previous night, the furious one at their first meeting. And it was difficult to understand his own desire to impress her. He caught himself almost boasting as he showed her the small kingdom he'd built on Grande Terre, and his face reddened.

Arielle's own pose was studied. She'd planned to play the part of a quiet, sweet young lady of average intelligence—with little interest in the island's fortifications. Her mind recorded the placement and number of cannon as, eyes wide, she exclaimed upon the blueness of the water, the beauty of a shell.

At the warehouse, Laffite opened a chest, its contents glowing even in the dimness of the building's cavernous interior. Scooping up a mass of jewels, he thrust them into her protesting hands.

"Take them," he insisted. "They are mine."

She wanted to throw them back at him with a gesture of revulsion, to scream at him that they were not his, but stolen—that there was blood on them. Trembling with the effort, she managed to remain calm, selecting a ruby pendant. "Only this one," she said.

He placed it about her throat where it seemed to burn her flesh. She forced a smile, maintaining her composure until they visited the barracoon, seeing the blacks in chains. Then she reverted to the angry girl who had faced him in his study.

"It's cruel," she said. "Inhuman! How can you

indulge in such traffick! And to keep them chained that way—!"

Laffite tried to explain. There was a market in black ivory. If he did not supply that market, others would. As for the chains, these Negroes were fresh from darkest Africa. They would be allowed more freedom as they were tamed. He did not allow his men to mistreat them. And soon they would be taken to The Temple, a *chênière* where giant oaks formed a natural amphitheater, to be sold at auction. They would find good masters, and have a better life than in their own land—

A slim black girl caught Arielle's eye. She was naked, except for a strip of cloth wound about her thighs, her small breasts barely budding. Young, with too-thin arms, there was a look of Junie about her. A whip on black flesh would bring the blood as it did on golden brown.

Sick with remembering, Arielle turned away. "I am tired," she said dully. "Do you mind if we return to the house?"

Without waiting for his answer, she walked away. He hurried to catch up with her, and she ignored his extended arm.

They reached the wide veranda, and he stopped her. "I have offended you in some way," he said, puzzled. "I would like you to think well of me—"

"I prefer not to think of you at all," she said, unable to control her revulsion at his trade. "Now if you will excuse me—"

"I will not!" His hands were on her shoulders, and he turned her to face him. "We were having an enjoyable conversation. Now what is wrong?"

"Look at them," a voice jeered behind him.

"Gambi told you, didn't he? Keeping the girl for himself—the way he takes the lion's share of everything—"

Laffite whirled. A group of men had gathered before his house. They were being joined by more, a menacing murmur running through the crowd as it edged forward. Gambi had rallied support.

"Gambi's our leader," one called out.

"He's been here the longest. We're tired of your laws!"

"We're going to attack any ships we please—and take what we want!"

The voices rose, blending together in a growling symphony.

Laffite faced them, his face pale but his voice firm. "Get back to your work," he commanded. "You have no business here."

A tall young man, little more than a boy, with a hard fox-face, stepped forward.

"We don't take orders from you any more," he said. "We take orders from Gambi, not Jean Laffite." He raised the pistol he held, a man's weapon in a boy's hand, trembling a little in his unsteady grip.

Laffite fired, and the boy fell. Blowing the smoke from his gun, Jean Laffite thrust it back into his waistband. A deadly hush fell upon the mob, then two men bent to lift the boy's body. As quickly as they had come, they melted away.

"There will be no more trouble," Laffite turned to Arielle with a half-apologetic smile. She was staring at him, face white and stricken.

"You killed him!"

"It was kill or be killed. You saw his gun—"

"But he was only a boy!"

"My dear young lady!" The privateer had lost

his patience. "Has no one ever told you a young snake is often more venomous than a mature one? Or would you prefer *Gambi* as your lord and master in my stead?"

The color stormed back into Arielle's face. "I do not regard you as my lord and master. And as far as my preference is concerned, I see no difference between one pirate and another!"

"Then perhaps I should give you to *Gambil*!"

She tilted her head, haughtily. "If I may be excused—?"

"Go and be damned to you," he muttered to her retreating back. Give her to *Gambi*? It would serve her right if he did! She'd brought trouble with her, just as he'd known that first day. And because he'd had to settle it, she blamed him.

Her demure demeanor, the wide-eyed interest she'd displayed today had been a sham, to cover up her most unpleasant disposition!

He would not think of her. He had the aftermath of an aborted mutiny to consider. Striding from the house, he made arrangements for *Gambi* to be transferred to his secondary headquarters at *Chênière Caminada*. There *Laffite* had trusted men. *Gambi* would find no converts among them. And the tempers here would cool without *Gambi* to fan the flames.

That it would also keep the men from molesting Arielle, he refused to consider as a reason. Her words kept haunting him. *I see no difference between one pirate and another.*

Arielle's shoulder sagged as she reached the haven of her room. She'd meant to hold her temper, to earn *Laffite's* trust. But the sight of the barracoon, followed by the death of the boy, had blown her



good intentions to smithereens. Now he would probably keep a close watch on her—or worse, turn her over to Gambi as he had threatened.

She was suddenly afraid of facing him again.

She didn't have to. Late in the day came the sound of cannon fire in the distance. Again, there was a flurry of activity on the shore below her window. Fighting ships moved out on the water and were gone.

With them went Jean Laffite.

A small vessel brought the word the next day. A British sloop had anchored near Laffite's fort at nearby Grand Isle, sending in a boatload of marines in an attempt to clean out the area. They were forced to retreat with heavy losses, and had now sailed away. Laffite, however, would remain at Grand Isle for a time.

The news only served to confuse Arielle further. She questioned Mrs. Grogan, saying she had been under the impression that Laffite and the British were working together.

"The lobster-backs?" Mrs. Grogan was indignant. "Hate their guts, he does! They try to take over this country, he'll send them packing, dearie!"

It didn't tally with what she'd been told. Of course, her trust in her mother-in-law's opinions was gone. But Governor Claiborne shared the same notion of Laffite, and he was an honest, upright man.

Her bewilderment didn't keep her from taking advantage of Jean Laffite's absence. In the company of Mrs. Grogan, she walked over the inhabited part of the island. It was Tauna who led her to the lovely places of Grande Terre; pointing out the small swamp deer, the flowers of the crossvine and trumpetvine, a heron standing in noble dignity on one leg, its reflection shimmering in dark water.

Occasionally she would visit with Nez Coupé's wife, playing with the many children—and thinking of Mindy. With a shock, she realized that, if it weren't for Mindy, she might even be happy here. The realization only strengthened her urge to escape—and then she found what she was seeking in the person of Louis, one of the noseless man's many sons. A bright-faced, gypsylike boy, he was immensely proud of his father's prowess.

"I do not see how he finds his way through the bayous," Arielle said. "I would be lost! I believe anyone would. But not Nez Coupé! He came here like a homing pigeon."

It was easy, the child boasted. He had often made the journey with his father. Some of it must be memorized. Some of it lay in following the currents that ran to the Gulf; the way the grasses slanted, the changes in vegetation.

Squatting, he drew a map in the sand with a stick. "You see?" he grinned. Then, with a bare foot, he erased it.

Arielle excused herself and ran to the house. There she tried to draw the map from memory. It didn't look the same, she had to concede. But it was better than nothing.

Now the trick was to get free of Mrs. Grogan and Tauna at the same time. Both of them, woman and girl, worshipped Jean Laffite. They had been set to watch Arielle, and they would watch. If she did manage to escape them for a moment, she must have a pirogue—and Laffite's men seemed to lounge along the shore day and night.

But she had a beginning. She had Laffite's knife and a map of sorts. One day as she visited with Nez Coupé's wife, she found her mending her husband's clothes against his return. "Let me help," Arielle

said impulsively. "I sew quite well, and I need something to do."

When she went back to her room, she had a mound of mending—and a new plan. It would be conspicuous if a woman set out in a boat—but a man?

That night, long after Mrs. Grogan was abed, she tried on the garments, her heart sinking. She'd forgotten how Nez Coupé's shirts revealed her curves. His trousers strained over her rounded hips and gaped at the waist. They didn't disguise her womanhood, but accentuated it.

Doggedly, she accomplished the mending and returned the items, and with them, her plan for escape.

Then there was nothing to do. July descended bringing hot, windless days, and those remaining on Grande Terre watched the waters and the sky for storms that didn't materialize. Drugged with heat, the island of Grande Terre drowsed the days away. And then Laffite's small armada was sighted against the sky. The master of Grande Terre was coming home.

Tauna and Mrs. Grogan were beside themselves with delight. Arielle felt her own pulses quicken, caught up in their excitement. It was only, she told herself, that a change—any change—was welcome.

The island came to life, women and children streaming to meet husbands and fathers—and lovers, Arielle thought wryly. Her eyes fastened on a small girl who flew, hair flying, toward the beach. She fell, entangled in her ragged skirt, but was up in a minute.

She was dark, gypsylike, but for a space she was Mindy. Arielle's eyes filled with tears as she realized Laffite's return diminished her chances of

escape. She might never see Mindy again. Dully, she wondered if Thaddeus Lindenwood had remained at Villeré-in-the-Swamp after her disappearance; if anyone was there to love Mindy—and see to her welfare.

Then her heart pounded as the tall figure of Jean Laffite stepped ashore, lifting dark, searching eyes toward her window.

## Chapter 13

Someone else was thinking of Mindy's welfare. Madam Villeré was most concerned with it. In fact, she had risen early this morning and gone to her study, where she did her best thinking, to ponder the matter. It had not been easy, limping down the hall, leaning on that damnable cane, and she was pale as she leaned back in her big chair and tried to collect her thoughts.

Mindy, like her sister, was becoming a nuisance. The hot July days had settled the household into an ennui—but not Mindy. Since her sister disappeared, she seemed to avoid the house as much as possible, hanging around the quarters with Coaley, her constant companion.

Not only was it unseemly, but she'd begun to pick up tags of information that she carried to chance guests, or to Lindenwood. Last week, when

the military Villerés called to see if any trace had been found of Arielle, the child had hinted darkly that there was a murderer in their midst; that probably Sukey and Junie had also been victims.

Then, last night, Thaddeus Lindenwood had come to her with a tale that Hawkins was mistreating Trill, his newest slave girl. That story, too, had come from Mindy. She had dismissed it with laughing admiration of the child's imagination, but he might decide to take it up with Ramon—

Madam Villeré had no intention of losing the best overseer she'd ever had. True, he had maltreated a girl or two, but he kept a tight rein on the nigras. She thought of the story that had come to her ears; the attack on Fort Sims at Mobile by Creeks and runaway slaves. Three hundred and fifty men, women, and children slaughtered. The slaves would not have intervened had they been kept in their place. And that, Hawkins knew how to do.

Ramon did not. He'd always been a fool about the nigras, treating them like humans. Her lips tightened as she thought of Cleone, and the worries she'd had while the girl was alive. She would be able to handle Ramon, but it would be best to avoid unpleasantness if possible. He'd been different somehow, since Arielle disappeared, more withdrawn, less inclined to listen when she spoke.

Nothing must disturb their relationship or affect Ramon's mission. She believed she had a way to rid herself of Mindy—and use her to her own ends at the same time. She rang for Blanche, asking her to summon Ramon at once.

The black woman hesitated. "Just got in, a little afore daylight, Missus. He sleepin'."

"Call him."

Ramon came, still dazed with fatigue after his

long ride from New Orleans. He took the chair she offered him and tried to smile.

"There is something we need to discuss," she said tersely.

He leaned forward, his expression struggling between hope and fear. "You've found Arielle? Mamacita—"

"We have not. The girl is gone, and I am certain she is dead. I feel we should have some kind of service. Perhaps on All Saints Day." She stopped at Ramon's stricken eyes. "You'll have to live with your loss, son. As I did with the death of your father. It is the living we should think of now. The child, Mindy. She needs a family atmosphere."

"But surely, she is happy here—"

"My health is much improved. There is no longer an excuse to postpone Luisa's marriage to Edward Allingham. I think I shall arrange it to take place at Christmas time. Then I must hint that Thaddeus Lindenwood has overstayed his welcome. A pity, since he is an entertaining gentleman. It will leave Mindy with only an ailing old woman for company—not a wholesome life for an active child."

"She could go with Luisa," Ramon ventured, his voice unsure.

"Luisa's unfortunate disposition will be hard enough on poor Edward. And Mindy is not Luisa's responsibility, but yours."

"Good God, I can't take the child to my bachelor's quarters!"

"I think I have the perfect solution," his mother said, demurely. "We will have a double wedding. Luisa and Edward, you and Elizabeth. Mindy will have a home, a mother. You will have an English bride, which will stand you in good stead when the

British take over. The image of a mature family man will aid you in your career—”

Ramon was on his feet. “Good God,” he said again. “How can you ever think of such a thing! I despise the woman! Of all the asinine—”

He stopped. Madam Villeré was leaning back, her face ashen and splotted with red. She seemed to be having difficulty breathing.

“Mamacita!”

She waved a weak hand. “I will be all right. But—please do not raise your voice to me again. It hurts me so—”

He was on his knees, her hands in his. “I am sorry, Mamacita. Forgive me. It is just that I cannot—cannot—”

“You do not have to make a decision now,” she said gently. “Think about it. You will see that I only want what is best for you. Now, I think I should rest.”

He helped her to a chaise, settling her comfortably, and left her, after her further reassurance as to her health. Outside her door, he paused in indecision, then made up his mind. He would return to New Orleans at once. Here, in the stifling atmosphere of this house, he had no more mind than a child. There must be no argument, for his mother’s sake. Even though he knew in his heart that she would win out in the end.

Going to the stable, he had his horse saddled and brought out for him. He mounted just as Mindy caught sight of him. She came flying across the yard, Coaley at her heels.

“Wait,” she called. “I have to talk to you. There’s something—”

For a moment, he felt something like loathing



for the child his mother had used as a wedge to prod him toward Elizabeth Allingham. She was his responsibility. Luisa was his responsibility. His mother. It was his responsibility to avenge his father's death by helping Spain regain power in this small part of the world—through British intervention.

He was sick of responsibility. He was sick of being smothered by females—even one so young.

He wheeled his horse and thundered across the wooden bridge that arched above the bayou's black water. Behind him, Mindy said disconsolately, "I guess he didn't hear me."

But Ramon had heard. And as he rode, he castigated himself for being a coward. He should have talked to the child. And he should have been gentle, but firm, with his mother. He wondered if every man was cast into a role dictated by circumstance. Too, his work with the British troubled him. He liked Claiborne, young Daumont. And one day, he would betray them.

Even the English did not value his advice. He'd worked, stirring Claiborne up against Laffite, hoping to drive the pirate into treating with the British. And the red-coated fools attacked Laffite in his own territory, thinking to gain the route to New Orleans by wiping out his holdings.

There was little chance for a pact between them now.

If only his mother hadn't set him on this course! If he'd been born black, or Cleone white. If only they could have had a life together! Or, even, dear God, if he had known how much Arielle meant to him before it was too late. If he hadn't held so stubbornly to his allegiance to the dead Cleone.

So many ifs. He might have taken advantage of

some of them; learned to live with those he couldn't change. But it was too late. Now his options were all behind him. He would betray his country. He would gain prominence, as he'd been promised. And he would marry Elizabeth Allingham.

He knew now that he'd rejected Arielle because he could have loved her. With Elizabeth, there would be no question of infidelity to the slave girl he'd thought of as his wife. Elizabeth would not ask much of him. A few marital forays in the blessed dark to fulfill his duties, and it would be done.

A swamp deer skittered across his path, and his horse danced, side-stepping at the intrusion.

Ramon Marquez gentled it, his voice soft, as he patted its neck, smoothing away its fears. Then he rode on, more slowly now that Villeré-in-the-Swamp was far behind him.

As he followed the lonely road, he tried to summon the face of Cleone to his mind. Instead, he saw the face of Arielle; Arielle, the child-woman he'd cheated of a true marriage, who lay dead somewhere, murdered, hidden in the swamp. Arielle, whose death would be made real in November, with a gloomy ceremony on All Saints Day.

The double wedding his mother planned for Christmas would be equally gloomy. A double-dying, as he and Elizabeth, Luisa and Edward, went forward to become united according to his mother's will.

His face twisted in agony. This time the name he uttered was not Cleone, but Arielle.

## Chapter 14

Arielle Marquez was far from dead, though sometimes she almost wished she were. The return of Laffite's fleet made the small island, only about six miles by three, seem like a teeming anthill. She did not feel free to visit Nez Coupé's wife, not with her husband home after a long journey. And her walks were not as pleasant. The ruffians of Laffite's crew did not speak to her or attempt to molest her in any way, but she was uncomfortable under their leering eyes.

Laffite himself did not try to see her. The long dining table downstairs was not set with its luxurious fittings. He took his meals in his study. Arielle had hers in her room. The several times they met, he inclined his head coldly, and she reacted in similar fashion.

Then he was gone, taking a number of slaves to

auction at The Temple. At least the barracoon, with its stench of misery, was empty. The bloodstains near the veranda where the mutineer had met his death, had long since disappeared. Perhaps there would be no more slave trade. No more deaths—

She was mistaken. Before Laffite's return, a slaver docked in the bay, and coffles of slaves were led ashore. The barracoon was packed more tightly than before. Then two young men engaged in a scuffle over Tauna's affections. Others joined. Before it was over, six were wounded, three dead.

They were animals, all of them. And the worst of all was their master, Laffite, who had gathered these lawless ones together in the name of profit.

She had to be gone before he returned again. She had to! Knowing Mrs. Grogan had developed a deep affection for her, she approached her. Someone would be willing to pay for her safe return, she said carefully. Her husband, perhaps Governor Claiborne. If she had the use of a small boat, perhaps a companion—

Mrs. Grogan laughed comfortably. "You don't know when you're well off, dearie. Good Lord, what I'd give to be in your shoes, an old warhorse like me. He's a gentleman, and he'll treat you good—"

"You forget that I have a husband." Arielle's voice was icy. "And that I detest the man. I'm sure the feeling is mutual."

The woman guffawed. "I've seen the way he looks at you," she said. "And you'll come around."

Arielle gave up. She knew her conversation would be reported to Laffite. She would be watched even more closely. There was no point in not exploring other avenues. She tried to talk to Tauna, who retreated behind a language barrier that did not exist. "No undelstand. Talkee Misse Glogan."

In desperation, she went in search of Nez Coupé's son, Louis. If he could help her escape, there would be money, a chance at growing in a respectable life. The boy backed away, dark eyes wide with fright. He did not want to leave Grande Terre. He'd been only boasting about knowing the waterlanes. No one would go against Laffite's will. It would mean death—

"I'm sorry, Louis." Her eyes misted as she reached out to put her hands on his thin, boy's shoulders. She must have been out of her mind, trying to bribe this child, not much older than Mindy. "Please forget what I said. I wouldn't involve you in anything dangerous for the world."

She turned abruptly and hurried away. She was halfway to the house when she heard him calling. "Madam Marquez—"

She waited and he arrived, panting, at her side. His eyes shifted from hers, and there was a pallor beneath his tan, but he was his small-boy braggart self.

"Did I ever tell you I do much fishing for Laffite's table? When you have eaten speckled trout, croaker, flounder, sheepshead, Spanish mackerel, it is I who brought it in. I bring oysters and shrimp also."

She had to smile, sensing that the boy was trying to make up for his refusal to help her. "I am sure that you're quite a fisherman," she said.

"It is true. But it is because I have a small boat of my own. I do not moor it as the others do, for fear that it will be stolen. I pull it into the scrub behind our house."

She stopped, appalled at what he was saying. He was telling her what she needed to know. But his own boat—

"Louis," she whispered, "Oh, Louis!"

His eyes met hers, then darted away. She knew he wanted no further mention of his gift. "I have enjoyed the fish very much," she said, formally. "I only wish I could—could repay you in some way."

"It is not necessary."

She restrained the desire to kiss his brown cheek, and was glad she had when she had gone a few steps and turned to look back at him. The boy's feet were planted wide, his slim shoulders straight. He looked very much a man.

Tauna fell in beside her. Mrs. Grogan was watching from the porch. The fear that they might have guessed at her conversation with Louis trembled inside her. She forced herself to remain calm as she entered the house and went to her room. She would have to escape tonight. With every day there was a stronger possibility that Laffite would return.

She began to plan. A length of the sea-mist netting from the bed curtains to shield against mosquitoes that were avid now. And food—

She saved the bread from her lunch tray, then sorted fruit from the basket always in her room; small bitter oranges, a coconut brought in on a brigand's ship. Not much, but it would see her through if she found her way. If she did not, if she were lost in the swamps, then food wouldn't matter.

She wrapped her booty in a shawl, and thrust it under her bed. There was much of the day left. She must try to sleep.

For the first time, her chambers were too hot to endure. There was no wind across the waters. After tossing for a while, she went down to Laffite's hammock on the veranda. There, cradled in its cool depths, she slept.

The man who strode up the steps several hours

later saw that his hammock was occupied, and smiled to himself. A courier had arrived under a white flag as his own ship landed him on the beach. In one hand Laffite held the message he'd received, with its official British seal. Over his shoulder, he carried saddlebags of gold, profits from the sale at The Temple. He'd excused himself from the men who'd gathered to greet him, wanting to rid himself of his load of gold, and to read his message in private.

Now his determination wavered. He approached the hammock and looked down at the sleeping girl.

Another face of Madam Marquez, he thought. Her face was serene in repose, dark lashes curling against sleep-flushed cheeks, the curve of her mouth so tender he longed to touch it. Instead, he set the hammock to swaying gently.

Arielle's eyes opened. For a moment she stared, confused, at the hand that set her bed to swinging; a dark, long-fingered hand, holding a letter with an intricate seal. Then her eyes traveled upward.

Jean Laffite.

With an effort, she suppressed a cry of panic and disappointment. She had hoped to be gone before his return. And to be found in this position was humiliating. There was no way she could rise with dignity.

She did the only thing she could think of. She closed her eyes, and pretended to go back to sleep, knowing that he still looked down at her with that mocking expression; that he wasn't fooled at all.

She waited until she heard him enter the house, then rose, peeping to see that the hall was empty before she entered and hurried to her room. She

would not leave it again, not until Grande Terre slept.

That night, after Mrs. Grogan was abed, Arielle moved silently about her room, making ready for her escape. A plain dark gown, the small pile of provisions wrapped in a shawl. Laffite's knife. Then she sat by the window, afraid to sleep. She must choose the darkest time—

In spite of her determination, she found herself nodding. At the edge of sleep, she saw Laffite's hand resting on the edge of the hammock, the letter he held, with its strange seal. . . .

*The British Lion!*

The thought jerked her fully awake. The tale of the attack on Grand Isle had been a lie! Laffite was treating with the English! If she could get hold of the message, it would brand him for what he was, a pirate and a traitor! Claiborne would be happy to obtain such information.

She forced herself to think of her mother's death, her own abduction, of the slaves in the barracoon, the young man shot down before her eyes.

She would see Laffite in prison, if it was the last thing she ever did!

The time she waited for came. There was still some light from the moon, but it was dark enough. The palmetto-thatched huts were barely visible, the waters lighter than the land, divided from it by a ribbon of gold. A place of deadly beauty. A place she would be glad to leave.

Taking up her shawl, thrusting her knife into her waistband, Arielle went from her bedroom, through the small sitting room, and opened the door to listen. Nothing. She eased it shut behind her, and tiptoed down the silent stairs. There she turned to



fulfill her last mission in this house. She intended to take some evidence with her when she left it.

The door to Laffite's study was not locked, as she had feared. The drapes were opened, the moon shining directly on the desk pointing out a square of white. The message? It seemed too good to be true!

Arielle shivered as she looked toward the privateer's chair, turned to face the window as she'd seen it on that first day, then crept forward, her hand going out to the paper she'd come for.

Then the chair began to turn slowly. Arielle froze as Laffite faced her, eyes unreadable dark pools in his white face. A deadly face. He rose, towering over her. She reached in panic for the knife at her waist, fingers clumsy with fear.

He caught at her wrist, twisted it, and the weapon clattered to the floor.

"It would seem my guest abuses her privilege," he grated. "Therefore I am entitled to withdraw my protection of you—even against myself."

Still maintaining his painful grip, he pulled Arielle toward him. His arms went around her, and she was lifted from her feet, crushed against him, unable to breathe as his mouth found hers, bruising, hurting—

For an instant, she was weak against him, feeling an odd reaction, something within her answering. Then she fought to be rid of his burning mouth, some fragment of her mind telling her to bring up a disabling knee.

Laughing, he anticipated her move, catching her behind the knees with a sweep of his arm, holding her cradled like a child. He carried her to the door and up the broad stair that led to her room.

Helpless in his grasp, Arielle fought the desire to scream. It would not help her. Laffite was the

master here. No one would come to her aid. And she would not give him the satisfaction. She let her body go limp, hoping her dead weight would impede his progress, but he didn't falter.

Reaching her chambers, he carried her in and dumped her, unceremoniously, on her bed. Then he went to the mantel, where a small candle burned, and carried it to her, holding it close to her face.

"You fool," he said. "You little fool!"

She made herself return his gaze; seeing the dark eyes that glittered with anger, the sensuous mouth now set in a cruel line. He drew a shuddering breath.

"I must decide what to do with you," he said hoarsely. "I can send you to Gambi, since you are the spy he claimed you to be. Or I can keep you here—and show you who is lord and master!"

Arielle lay in stubborn silence. She had gambled and she had lost. Whatever happened, she did not intend to plead. She did not move, her eyes did not leave his as he traced a finger along her cheek, the line of her throat, his hand sliding beneath her gown to caress her shoulder. Then he abruptly drew away.

"Mrs. Grogan!"

The woman answered his call, an odd-looking creature in her dressing gown, hair standing on end, eyes bright with curiosity as she surveyed the scene. Laffite scowled at her.

"You will remain with Madam for the rest of the night. She is not to leave the room. Do you understand?"

The woman nodded, and he left the room, slamming the door behind him. Mrs. Grogan stared at Arielle in awe. "Dearie, what in the hell did you do?"

Arielle turned her face away. She had no intention of speaking to Mrs. Grogan, or to anyone. Out there in the moonlit palmetto scrub, young Louis' boat still waited. She would escape if she could. If she could not, she would try to meet whatever came without losing her pride.

Her mouth still burned from Jean Laffite's. She scrubbed at it with her hand. Dear God, what was to become of her!

Laffite made his way back to his study, stumbling a little. There he lit a candle, seeing the dark shawl-wrapped bundle on the floor. Opening it, he dumped its contents on his desk. Some veiling. A few pitiful scraps of food. The girl had been planning to run away.

He wished to God she had!

He'd been unable to sleep tonight. At The Temple, he'd learned that Governor Claiborne had issued a proclamation naming his men and himself as outlaws and criminals. It called upon all citizens to aid in catching them and bringing them to justice, making it a criminal offense to have any dealings at all with Jean Laffite.

Claiborne was whistling in the wind of course. There would be business as long as there were profits to be made.

Then coming home, he'd found the message from the British. They asked him to treat with them, offering him rank, honors to join with them in conquering American territory. He smiled, wryly. Because they couldn't overcome him, they sought his cooperation.

But it wasn't Claiborne's proclamation or the British message that had kept him awake. Instead, his sleeplessness had been due to the memory of a young girl's dreaming face. Women and business

did not mix. He'd learned that to his sorrow many years before. Yet her look of innocence had occupied his mind. He'd sat here in this very chair, wondering if he could woo her, bring her to love him in time.

And all the while, she was planning to escape—taking information with her that would incriminate him, not only with Claiborne, but with American citizens who were his friends.

Good God! He wished he had never set eyes on her. If he had any sense, he would put her in a pirogue, point her toward New Orleans, and tell her to go! But she would never make it alone. And after their earlier arrest, and Gambi's talk against the girl, he dared not risk another mutiny among his men.

He thought of the way she had looked at him, an honest, level look, in spite of her fear. It was that look that had saved her from ravishment. Because for a moment, he remembered he was not a pirate, but a privateer; that he was Jean Laffite, a gentleman.

## Chapter 15

For the next several weeks Arielle was a prisoner in her chambers. Mrs. Grogan left her after that first night, remaining in her own bedroom, maintaining a disapproving silence. The second night, Arielle dressed and tiptoed to her door, opening it, then closing it quickly, her heart thundering.

Across the hall, arms folded across his chest, was a leering man, a member of Laffite's piratical crew.

She returned to her bed, trying to control her trembling. Certain that Jean Laffite would come in the night, she hardly slept. But when several days had passed and he had not come, she knew that he would not. It was his way of showing her she was not worthy of his attention.

Piqued, but relieved at the same time, she felt

that punishment had not been forgotten, but only delayed. Keeping her in isolation was his way of breaking down her nerve.

She spent most of her time watching from the window. She was desperately afraid Laffite would learn of her conversation with Louis, of the unspoken offer to help her. She watched for the boy and saw him, his thin body shirtless, gleaming in the sun. He was safe then. She drew a long sigh of relief.

After a time, the window-watching palled. She began to lie abed, thinking of what might become of her. She had made, in Laffite, a formidable enemy, and the fear of what he might do with her was ever present. She had to keep her mind on something else.

She took pen and paper and began to set down facts and figures for the eyes of Governor Claiborne; number of ships, guns, the location of gun emplacements, an approximate number of men. She knew the futility of her effort, but it was something to do. And there was always a chance.

She kept the papers with her always, thrust into her bosom by day, beneath her pillow at night. Also, beneath her pillow, she kept the statuette with which Mrs. Grogan had struck Gambi. If Laffite did come to her, she would pretend to comply. And then—

Laffite did not come.

She began to consider another plan. She would use a candle to set fire to the bed's sea-green hangings. Then she would stand just inside the sitting room door with the statuette, striking down her guard when he entered at the smell of smoke. She would run for the boat, hidden in the scrub—

But there was Mrs. Grogan to contend with. And probably, with her luck, she would run straight into Jean Laffite.

She would wait.

To keep from going mad, she forced herself to go over her memories, bit by bit. *Her life with her aunt. Joining her mother after Mindy was born. The actors at the boardinghouse, most of them past their prime, who had become her true family. Her mother's marital experiments. Her death. New Orleans with its brilliant, flashing color. Henri Lanier. Her marriage to Ramon—*

*Dear gentle Ramon, whose mother sat like a fat spider in a web of her own weaving, a destroyer—*

*Andre, who haunted her dreams. Cleone, Sukey, Junie. Her own abduction. Gambi. Laffite.*

She had come to the present once more. Grimly, she closed her mind against it, and returned to remembering. *Luisa. The Allinghams. Thaddeus D. Lindenwood.* She had a vision of the old actor, Mindy on his knee, teasing him to find out what the D. stood for. He would never tell.

Arielle made a game of it to occupy her mind. Returning to pen and paper, she began to write down names beginning with D. *David. Donald. Derwent. Derwood. Daniel—*

Dear God, the days were so long!

The monotony ended with the arrival of a letter in Jean Laffite's hand.

*You will join me at dinner, tonight, it read. There will be a guest. You will dress for the occasion, and will comport yourself in a ladylike manner, if possible*

It was signed, *Your lord and master.*

Arielle wadded the note and threw it against the wall. Then she picked it up, smoothed it, and

read it once more. She would have to go. It would be like the man to send a couple of ruffians to drag her down ignominiously. No—she wouldn't challenge Laffite in this way.

She went to the wardrobe, and rifled through its contents. So few respectable things! Most of them seemed designed for a New Orleans lady of the night. The ruby taffeta, for instance, cut so low that it was basted to a padded hanger. Even Mama would have been shocked at its design—

Dress for the occasion. That she would do!

Mrs. Grogan had evidently been allowed to break her imposed silence. She bustled about, gabbing cheerfully, as she prepared a scented bath. "Don't know what you did to Jean, dearie, but he's really been on his high horse lately. Told me to keep my mouth shut, or he'd shut it permanent. Thought I'd bust!"

"He's a beast," Arielle said angrily.

"Don't take that attitude, dearie. He's a fine man, he is. Now you got you a chance to kiss and make up. Relax and enjoy your evening."

"I intend to enjoy it." Arielle sank into the perfumed tub and closed her eyes. "Mrs. Grogan, his note mentioned a guest. Do you know who it is?"

"Not supposed to tell you, dearie. Somebody that's got dealings with Jean, and lives off the island. Somebody you're acquainted with. Guess I can say that much."

Arielle frowned in bewilderment. No one she knew had business with Laffite and his men. Unless—Henri Lanier? How would he feel at seeing his stepdaughter a prisoner? Or—another thought struck her. Gambil! He lived "off the island" now. A shudder ran through her body. Perhaps Laffite intended to carry out his threat in style.



Towelng herself dry, she allowed Mrs. Grogan to help her into her petticoats, then slid the ruby taffeta over her head. It was even more revealing than she'd thought, barely covering her tip-tilted breasts, accentuating a tiny waist before it flared into yards of rustling material. Her throat and shoulders looked so naked—

She searched in a chest, finding the ruby pendant Laffite had given her from the wealth of the storehouse. It was just made for the dress, though it seemed to call attention to her décolletage. She would wear her hair down, she thought, a little nervously. At least it would provide a cover of sorts.

She hardly recognized the girl who looked back from the mirror. Only her pallor and the blue honesty of her eyes detracted from the picture of a courtesan.

"You need some face paint," Mrs. Grogan said. She rummaged in a chest filled with slippers and shawls, coming up with a box of colors.

Arielle was delighted. Many times she had helped her mother with stage makeup. She applied it now with a heavy hand. Brilliant carmine for her lips, echoed in tinted cheeks. She rimmed her eyes darkly with kohl, and applied a beauty patch on one creamy shoulder.

"How do I look?" she asked Mrs. Grogan.

The woman clasped her hands in admiration. "Just lovely, dearie!"

Arielle restrained a laugh. She knew what she looked like. There had been many such ladies in New York, hanging about theater entrances to attract the attentions of men, going with them for pay. If nothing else, her experience on the fringes of the acting profession had given her a liberal education. She knew one when she saw one—

And now, she was one.

What looked lovely to Mrs. Grogan, would not appeal to Jean Laffite. But she had dressed for the occasion.

A fan of egret feathers completed the costume, along with tiny gilt slippers. Arielle swirled, hearing the rustle of taffeta. Then, recalling a role in which her mother played a seductive creature, coming on stage to sensuous music, she did a similar performance.

"Oh, my." Mrs. Grogan was overcome. "Oh, my!"

Tauna, coming to the door to announce dinner, was equally impressed. Struggling against a state of delayed nerves, Arielle shut everything from her mind but the music of her mother's entrance. Moving to it, taffeta whispering, every movement of her body issuing a flagrant invitation, Arielle swayed into the dining room.

Two men stood waiting near the window. They turned at the rustle of her gown, Laffite's face turned to stone; the newcomer's stricken. The glass he held dropped from his fingers as he said, "Oh my God!"

The music she walked to slowed and jangled to a stop as Arielle Marquez, powdered, painted, and dressed like a prostitute, faced Andre Villeré.

## Chapter 16

Andre Villeré had arrived earlier in the afternoon. He had changed much since Laffite last saw him. There were new fine lines about his mouth, a touch of silver at his temples, and the old devilish expression was gone from his eyes.

He was tired, he said at Jean Laffite's concerned questioning. But it was more than that. The wound he'd received at Mardi Gras ached from the damp of his journey by water. And he had failed in his mission. He had gone to New Orleans on Laffite's behalf, suggesting his aid be asked in the war with England, saying that the privateer, himself, was willing—

General Villeré of the Home Guard agreed with such a course of action. Brigadier General Flournoy took no stand one way or the other, making vague promises to look into the matter. And Governor

Claiborne said he'd associate with no damned buccaneer.

And that was that.

His mission had failed. But what affected Andre Villeré the most was the news he received from his kinsman, the general. Young Arielle, wife of his stepbrother, was missing—and presumed dead. It was known she was struck down. The weapon had been found, with unmistakable evidence. Apparently her body had been dragged into the swamp.

The news had lain within him like a sickness as he returned to Grande Terre. He was able to forget her part in the death of Cleone and her betrayal of Laffite and himself. He could only remember the blue innocence of her eyes, the way her body felt against his own, the softness of her mouth. She'd seemed so defensless, so vulnerable.

And now she stood before him in Laffite's house. Not dead. And not the Arielle he remembered. A painted hussy. His eyes went bleak.

Arielle's first impulse had been to run to him, to beg him to take her home to Mindy. Then she remembered that he was Laffite's man, that she had been abducted when she went to him for help. She saw the change in his eyes as he looked from her to Laffite.

Let him think what he would!

She went to Laffite, putting a hand on his arm, familiarly. "You did not tell me our guest would be my brother-in-law," she pouted, prettily.

The privateer had been shocked at the change in her. Now it tickled his deep sense of humor. Still another side to the lady. It pleased him to play along with her charade. He pulled her to him, slipping an arm about her waist.

"She's looking lovely, isn't she, my friend?"

"Indeed," Andre said stiffly. "Her—high color—becomes her."

It was an uncomfortable meal, Laffite enjoying the situation at first, then gradually becoming quiet and thoughtful. He had always prided himself on being an intuitive man. He was beginning to divine the purpose in Arielle's charade.

May I ask how you came here?" Andre addressed Arielle, but kept his eyes on his plate.

She laughed, a high, nervous laugh. "I found life at Villeré-in-the-Swamp to be quite dull."

"You are thought to be dead, you know."

"Really? Then no one will look for me. That is welcome information." She spoke in the same light voice, but her heart was bleeding. *Oh, Mindy, Mindy! I'm here, I'm alive. Don't grieve—*

Andre Villeré rose, abruptly. "I do hope you will excuse me. I am very tired after my journey."

"Of course." Laffite pulled a bell cord, summoning Tauna. "Show our guest to his room."

They went out together, Tauna looking up at the tall man with eyes of admiration. Arielle frowned after them. The girl was an amoral little creature. She wondered if—

"You look unhappy, my dear. Is something wrong? The dessert is not to your taste?"

Arielle jumped a little as Laffite spoke. "I am quite happy, thank you." It sounded forlorn, and she forced a gaiety she didn't feel. Remembering the look of revulsion in Andre Villeré's eyes, some perversity drove her on in her wildly flirtatious behavior.

Laffite went along with her act: He made no mention of the night she attempted to take the British message, nor of her long imprisonment. He only watched her with an odd expression of mingled

amusement and sadness. Finally he rose and escorted her to her room.

When they reached the door he bowed, taking both her hands in his, kissing them. "It has been a pleasant evening," he said formally.

"I have enjoyed it, too," she lied.

He looked at her, shaking his head, his eyes shadowed. "You love him very much, don't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she gasped. "If you mean Andre Villeré—I hate him!"

"Then what were you doing at his home in the middle of the night?"

"I told you! I—I was looking for a runaway slave!"

"Then I must believe you." He inclined his head and left her.

Closing the door against him, she went into the small dressing room and scrubbed vigorously at her face with cold water. Feeling clean again, she donned her nightdress and lay down. Why had she persisted in that idiotic charade? Why? And why did it matter that Andre Villeré thought she had come here of her own free will? That she was Laffite's woman?

She remembered the day in the cane field, when he had held her, touching his mouth to hers with such tenderness. The way she had responded to his embrace, melting against him, her lips parting. And the night at Mardi Gras. For a time, she would have been his for the taking. Both times he had put her from him.

Maybe seeing her with Laffite had been no surprise to him. It probably fit with his earlier analysis of her character.

Sick with humiliation, she tossed and turned. The dressing room door was open; from the room

beyond, she could hear Mrs. Grogan's snoring. And a new thought penetrated her mind. There was something different about tonight. Something missing from the usual routine—it could not be—

Slipping from bed, she went through the sitting room, carefully opening the door a crack. There was no one there. No guard! Apparently, Laffite had been fooled by her act.

Whirling, she pulled a heavy cloak over her nightdress. She would not stop for food—or anything else. This time, she would take no chances.

She went, soft-footed, down the stairs and unbarred the heavy door. There was no guard here, though she could see several down at the beach, silhouetted against the sky. Near Nez Coupé's house, the island curved. She could manage to get the boat into the water without being seen. She would be free, she exulted. Free!

Carefully, she made her way across the veranda, letting herself down at the side where there were no steps, and there was a screening shrub. Moving noiselessly from shadow to shadow, she made her way to the rear of Nez Coupé's house.

Inside, a child cried, and she heard a woman's voice speaking soft comforting words. She crept toward the scrub where the boat was hidden, flinching at the sound of loud laughter from afar. Now to find the boat. Please God, let her be able to get it into the water—

The pirogue was gone. A barren spot showed where it had been. The ground, composed of sand and shell was scarred, indicating that it had been slid into the water.

She knew where it would be, drawn up on the guarded shore. There had been no need for a watcher outside her room tonight. Laffite had removed all

means of escape. Everyone on Grande Terre served as his eyes and ears.

She wondered if he knew she couldn't swim.

Arielle stumbled back to the house, not bothering to conceal her movements. She paused for a moment on the veranda, looking at the moon's molten path on the water. Somewhere, across the dark and sinister swamplands, the same moon shone on Mindy, turning her freckles into a dust of gold, gilding her tangled curls.

With a muffled sob, she entered the house and went upstairs to bed.

Andre Villeré was also looking at the moon. Unable to sleep for thinking of Arielle, he had risen and gone to the window. There was an ache in his chest he couldn't identify. Homesickness, he told himself. It had been too long since he had been home, tending his flowers and garden, basking in old Cinnie's affection.

Cinnie was all he had left from a happy childhood. After his mother died, the usurper had come. He and Ramon might have learned to tolerate each other if it hadn't been for Madam Villeré who placed all her doting attentions on her son.

The woman had driven a wedge between himself and his father. His own rebellious nature hadn't helped matters. He'd run away, leaving his father to die—and Luisa, unloved from the beginning.

And now, God help him, he was in love with his stepbrother's wife.

The thought startled him. He raised one hand as if to brush it away. In love with her? God, no! He despised the girl! First his stepmother's toady, and now mistress to Jean Laffite. He'd like to know how she came here, and what had changed her from



little-girl helpless into a seductive siren. But after her brittle answers to his questions, he'd be damned if he'd ask anymore.

Speak of the devill

He leaned closer to the glass, identifying the small figure running toward the big house. Her cloak flew out behind her and the moon shone white on what was clearly a nightdress.

She'd evidently attended some midnight tryst. Not satisfied with putting horns on Ramon Marquez, she was fitting a pair for Jean Laffite. Perhaps that was her problem. The day he'd held her in his arms, she'd been willing—

And he had laid it to his own manly charms! For no reason at all, he doubled his fist and struck the wall.

He would leave in the morning.

He rose and packed his small amount of gear at dawn. Before he had finished, Tauna knocked at his door. Jean Laffite wished to see him. Feeling belligerent, a chip on his shoulder, Andre stalked down the stairs and walked, stiff-legged, into the study. He glared at the man behind the desk.

Jean Laffite, too, had suffered a sleepless night. His face was ashen with fatigue, and he rubbed his temples. "Sit down, Andre. Tauna is bringing coffee."

He was silent until the girl entered with a tray, then turned to the window, a cup of the black Louisiana brew in his hand.

"I appreciate your efforts in my behalf," he said. "I don't think your mission failed. If there is war, Claiborne will come around. He will be forced to."

"General Villeré shares your opinion." Andre was

slightly confused. They'd been over this ground, yesterday.

"You've done well."

For a moment, there was silence. Then Laffite said, "I want you to do something else for me. A private mission. Will you do it?"

"If I can."

"I want you to dispose of a nuisance for me. Rid me of a woman."

Andre jumped. "What the hell!"

"Wait." Laffite held up a staying hand. "Let me explain." He unfolded the story of Arielle's kidnapping, while Andre Villeré listened in disbelief.

"My house? In the night? What was she doing there?"

Laffite shrugged. "She will not say. But her coming created a mutiny. Gambi held a personal grudge against her. She stabbed him, you know. He wanted her, and when I refused he used her as a tool against me. He spread word of her part in the Pearl incident, and accused her of being a spy. If I release her, any setbacks we have will be laid to her, and therefore to me. I can't afford dissension at this time—"

"I don't understand—"

"Spy or not," Laffite sighed, "the girl is here through no fault of her own. And I feel she is more disruptive here than if she were returned. She has tried to escape, but she had to be stopped. She would die in the swamps, alone. But if someone were to help her, without my knowledge—"

"You're asking me to steal her out from under the noses of your guards here? Good God, Jean! And what about my further work—smuggling guns and ammunition to supplement General Villeré's

supply? I wouldn't be able to show my face here again! Lose a war—over a woman?"

Laffite put his cup down and laced his fingers before him. "You can manage. I want the girl returned to her home."

"I think you're making a mistake. Ramon Marquez is our enemy. If she's seen anything here, it will go straight to Claiborne."

"A woman's word. And I can defend Grande Terre."

Andre stared at him. "But you cannot defend yourself. Is that your reason?"

Laffite flushed. "Women and business do not mix."

"I see." Andre did. Arielle Marquez had gotten under Laffite's skin as she had under his own. "I will try to work something out." He turned at the door. "She—has not been harmed in any way?"

"And if she has?"

"She is my stepbrother's wife, despite our differences. I would have to kill you."

Laffite laughed, spontaneously. "I assure you, the girl is something of a wildcat. I have never taken a woman who wasn't willing."

"Nor have I," Andre Villeré said grimly. "But I may, I may."

## Chapter 17

By afternoon Andre Villeré's mind reeled with a kaleidoscope of impressions. He had visited the talkative Nez Coupé, drawing him out while children scrambled over his lap and vied for his attention. The noseless pirate referred to Arielle as "the little one." He saw her as an innocent, someone to be protected. She had appeared at Andre's door just as they had finished burying a box of guns and ammunition according to their contract. She had been injured, receiving a bad blow to the head. She said she'd been searching for a runaway slave and had fallen from her horse.

Andre frowned. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had a riding accident. But her excuse, the time—it seemed unlikely.

Then Nez Coupé was off into one of his favorite stories. The way the girl had used her knee to dis-

courage Gambi; how she'd stabbed him with his own knife.

Not exactly the acts of a helpless, innocent female, Andre thought. He said nothing, and laughed at the joke on Gambi as Nez Coupé expected him to do.

Leaving the battered little man's house, children swarming after him in Pied Piper fashion, Andre approached Pierre Laffite. He casually mentioned Arielle, and Pierre's slightly crossed eyes looked troubled.

"She worries me," he confesed. "She has a keen and inquiring mind. She has seen too much here. If she should escape, she would go straight to Claiborne. And there is her husband—forgive me, I know your relationship—who is a weak but dangerous man. I've tried to talk to Jean, but he's besotted with the woman. All I can do is keep watch—"

Andre talked with a man called Silva, a former friend of Gambi's. He believed Arielle should be put to death. Already one man had died because of her presence here. And Gambi himself had been banished.

Still another said, sullenly, that Laffite was keeping the best things for himself. The girl, for instance. By rights she should have gone to Gambi. Another alternative was to share her around. There were a lot of womanless men on Grande Terre.

As he spoke, young Louis, Nez Coupé's son, was standing at Andre's elbow. Andre looked down at the boy, seeing him pale, his jaw set at the man's words. As they walked away together, he asked off-handedly, "What do you think, Louis? Is he right?"

"The man's a damned skunk," the boy said hotly. "They ought to let her go! But Laffite—," he

stopped suddenly, looking up at Andre with fear in his eyes.

Andre placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps they will," he said. "Now, tell me, how is the fishing going?"

By nightfall Andre had gained a confused picture of the girl: she was helpless and innocent; a wildcat, who knew where to kick a man, and was able to stab him with his own knife; a clever spy; and a woman who dressed like a trollop and walked in a knowingly seductive way.

The words of Gambi's friends rang in his ears: "by rights she should have gone to Gambi"—or be shared among them. . . .

Laffite was right. She had to be removed from the island. But how was he to accomplish it without getting caught himself? And if he could manage it, would she even go? Last night she'd seemed quite happy with her lot. She might not accompany him, even if he offered her the opportunity.

Then he would not tell her. He would handle her escape with the utmost secrecy, keeping his plans even from her.

He had only accomplished one thing today. He'd found an ally in young Louis, Nez Coupé's son. The lad seemed to have an affection for Arielle. Perhaps he would be able to enlist his aid. But first, he'd find a way to talk to the girl alone.

All day Arielle had remained shut up in her room in hopes of avoiding Andre Villeré. The day had been sweltering. As dusk fell she felt the need to get out into the air. Leaving the house quietly, she walked inland on a path Tauna had shown her. It was good to be alone. Laffite's guard had relaxed

now that all means of leaving the island had been closed.

She found the spot she was looking for. A small natural pool, rounded like a cup, hidden in scrub palmetto. Sinking down on a small hill of shell and sand, she pushed her damp hair back.

The water looked cool and inviting. She longed to put her bare feet into it, but she had seen the work of leeches. But it was so hot—

Like an answer to a prayer, a small breeze stirred, rattling through the scrub. She lifted her face to it, fanning her hair with her fingers. She didn't hear the footsteps behind her.

"May I join you?" Taking a step backward, Arielle whirled to face Andre. He caught at her arm.

"Careful, you don't want to fall in." He gestured toward the pool, his eyes scanning her face. No paint tonight. Her eyes still soft with musing, she looked like the girl he remembered. Then her features tightened, her eyes narrowed to a blaze of blue. She jerked free of him.

"I am quite all right," she said in a choked voice. "You startled me."

"I apologize. I want to talk to you."

"I was just leaving." Arielle put a hand to her throat to still the pulse that hammered there. "I have already heard your opinion of me. I don't care to listen to anything you have to add." Nervously, she stepped back once more.

He caught at her wrist. "Watch it!"

She glanced behind her. One more step, and she would be in the pool. But Andre blocked the path before her. She tried to control her feeling of desperation. "If you will excuse me—"

"I will not. Why did you go to my home that night? I told you not to return."

Indeed he had. He had kissed her, broken down her defenses, then brutally told her to never come again, that she was not welcome.

"I will not be interrogated. All I can say is that my visit had nothing to do with you."

"And suppose I say it did! You were abducted at my door. You appeared there at an ungodly hour, injured—"

She doubled her fists. "I was searching for a slave. I fell from my horse. I'm sick of explaining. Now, will you stand aside?"

"Please, I'm trying to help you!"

"You and your kind have helped me enough!"

He looked at her, helpless and angry. The moon reflected on her face, outlining its purity. This was not the hussy he'd seen in action last night, but the girl he'd held in his arms and kissed. She was close to him. So close.

"Would it help if I apologized once more. The things I said that night in New Orleans, back at the hotel, were uncalled for. I was keyed up. There was a warrant out for my arrest. And then I learned Cleone was dead. Forgive me."

He put his hands on her shoulders, seeing her expression change at his touch. Her blue eyes held a wonder as her lips parted.

"Oh God," he groaned. "Oh God!" Blinded by emotion, he pulled her to him, touching the mouth that flamed beneath his own, her body fitting against his as he crushed her closer; warm, compliant, pulsing.

She could have been his in the cane field. That night at Mardi Gras. She could be his now—



And she was his stepbrother's wife.

He gave a shuddering sigh and pushed her from him. "Arielle—"

It was like a dash of cold water, bringing her to her senses. He was playing his game again. *Kiss and run*. Anger exploded in her brain.

With a darting movement, she ducked beneath his arm, whirled as he turned to face her, and pushed hard against his chest with both hands. He stumbled backward, landing in the pool with a splash as she sped down the path.

She hurried toward the house, still seething with fury. He knew the effect he had on her, the devil! And like a fool, she'd let herself be swayed again. He wouldn't be laughing at her now at least!

Reaching her room, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her eyes were stormy, her dark hair hanging like a gypsy's. She put a hand to her bruised mouth and backed away. She looked like a girl who'd been kissed.

She would not see him again, if she had to remain in this room for the rest of her life. She did not trust him. Even worse, she didn't trust herself. A bride, whose only kisses had come from other men.

She had an uncomfortable feeling he knew or guessed at her marital situation. That he took a secret delight in his power to make her bend to his will, then reject her. It was another way of showing his superiority to Ramon, of evening the score.

Ramon had his faults, she thought furiously as she readied herself for the night. He was weak, true. Dominated by his mother, and unable to see her true nature. He was certainly no husband to Arielle herself. But he was kind, gentle, a friend. And he

was not a traitor to his country, dealing with the British, treating with pirates!

Then why couldn't she feel toward him as she did toward Andre?

I feel nothing toward Andre, she told herself as she climbed into bed. Nothing but contempt!

Next morning, she woke to hear Tauna talking with Mrs. Grogan in the adjacent room. Andre Villéré had gone. Tauna was disconsolate. Such a beautiful man!

"He'll be back, dearie," the older woman comforted her.

"But we did not have the time for *anything*."

Grimly, Arielle climbed out of bed and made her presence known.

She was still feeling cross when she answered a summons to Laffite's study. He looked strange this morning, staring at her with smoldering eyes as if he were memorizing her face. She was uneasy, wondering if she'd been spied upon last night, if Andre's kiss, and her reaction to it, had been reported.

"You sent for me?"

He tore his gaze away from her face and looked down at his desk. "I am taking the Negroes from the barracoon in the morning. There will be an auction at The Temple. I would like you to accompany me."

She imagined the scene. Long lines of black bodies, sweaty with fear. The jangling of chains. A human being placed upon a block and sold like an animal! Arielle closed her eyes, sickly. "I prefer not to attend."

"Then ignore my invitation." His voice was silky. "Instead, regard it as a command. From your lord and master, if you will! You will go peaceably, or I will have you dragged there!"

Turning, she walked from the room, her shoulders straight. Jean Laffite, behind her, looked suddenly old.

She went outside to walk off her anger. Fists clenched, she marched along, too blind to notice someone had fallen in beside her. She stopped when a small brown hand touched her arm.

"Louis! I haven't seen you for a long time." Her enthusiasm sounded false in her own ears.

"I have been busy," the boy said, bragging a little. "I am old enough to help Laffite now. I have been grooming the slaves who will go to market tomorrow."

Like a wolf's cub, Arielle thought dismally, he will grow into a wolf. She turned away, but the boy's insistent hand stayed her. "My father says you are going to the auction. Is this true?"

"I suppose so."

He sighed, happily. "That is good. I am going, too. I wish to look for my boat. It was stolen, and I hear it was left at The Temple, across the island from where the auction takes place. It is near a large dead tree which was struck by lightning. It points into the air like this." He held up two fingers.

Arielle had been paying scant attention, but something in the child's voice, the urgency in his eyes jerked her to alertness. He was telling her there was another chance to escape, pinpointing the boat's location for her. She wanted to babble her gratitude, to ask how he'd managed it, to throw her arms about his thin frame and hug him.

Instinctively, she knew it would be best left as it was. "I hope your boat is found," she said in a careful voice.

He grinned, an impish child's grin. "I am sure it will be."

Arielle returned to the house with wings on her heels. The boat would be there. And no doubt there would be some confusion during the auction. She would wait for just the right moment. Then she would slip away.

Right under the nose of Jean Laffite.

## Chapter 18

The next morning dawned hot and sultry. The residents of the Baratarian swamps, human and animal, gasped for breath. In the depths of the swamp-land nothing moved. On Grande Terre the gates of the barracoon were opened, and lines of blacks, their bodies glistening with sweat, shuffled down to the shore. Arielle, still clad in her nightdress, turned from the window, saddened at the thought that the journey taking her to freedom would carry them into a lifetime of slavery.

She rummaged through the wardrobe, selecting a heavy velvet gown that buttoned down the front. It would be easy to slip off should she have to run. And its heavy folds would conceal the fact that she wore little beneath it. No petticoats. Only her shift and lace-trimmed drawers.

Downstairs in his study Jean Laffite studied his glass and peered at the sky. As he'd predicted, the weather was making up. There would be a blow, but not a bad one. It should occur in late afternoon.

The last of the slaves clanked aboard the transport. In a few moments, they would all be secured in the hold. Jean Laffite's face sobered. It was time to collect his lady.

Arielle, leaving the room that seemed to have been created for her, felt a pang. Looking back, there were times she'd been happy here. If it were not for Mindy, perhaps she would not be so frantic to leave. She had cause to hate Jean Laffite, but he was no more of a monster than her mother-in-law.

She had learned that Tauna and Mrs. Grogan were not to accompany her and was happy at the knowledge. It would be easier to slip away unseen. But when it came to leaving them, knowing it was a final farewell, she felt a lump in her throat.

It's the heat, she thought. This dreadful heat.

Once aboard the ship, seated with Jean Laffite in the shade of an awning, a pitcher of chilled juice at her side, she was able to think more clearly. She thought of her mother's death. Of the young boy who had been shot down. Of the agony of the Negroes, crowded in a small hot space below.

She would be glad to get away from Grande Terre, a kingdom built on looting and plunder—on human misery.

Buyers were already arriving at The Temple. Wealthy plantation owners from New Orleans and farther. If it were not for the slaves, filing from the ship in chains, the place would look like a park. Tall liveoaks grew on the *chênière*, making a natural

amphitheater as Laffite had said. Arielle swallowed at a memory of New York, children playing on the grass, starched nursemaids pushing perambulators. She'd felt alone then, a stage-child, gripping Mindy's small hand as she watched them.

This was not a park. It was a place where serious business would be conducted. People would be bought and sold. And directly across the *chênière*, hidden now by trees in full leaf that drooped in the heat—would be a means of escape.

Laffite put an arm around her waist. "You will stay close to me." It was an order, not a request. She began to feel a fluttering of panic, wondering if he would ever let her go. It seemed hours before the crowd had gathered and it was time for the bidding to begin.

Laffite kept slanting a look at the sky. There were no clouds, but everything had a bright yellow tinge. Even the trees seemed rimmed in gold. And it was still.

"Do you think there will be a storm?" she ventured.

"Perhaps." He signaled for the auctioning to start.

The lesser bargains were put up first. The small, the weak, the unattractive. Dominique You, looking like a ruffled eagle, handled the bidding. Despite the quality of those to be sold early, they went quickly and at high prices. Few slavers dared to run the British blockade, and blacks were at a premium.

Despite the riches coming his way, Laffite seemed nervous, restive. He called a pause of half an hour before the prime specimens were shown, ostensibly to give Dominique You time to rest.

During that period, he was unusually talkative, telling Arielle of the history of the *chénière*. According to legend, it had once been used as a sacrificial temple by the Indians.

"It is still a sacrificial temple," she said crossly. "It hasn't changed."

The heat continued, and Arielle fanned herself with a handkerchief as the bidding began once more. The velvet gown had been a mistake, she admitted to herself. If the opportunity came, she would be too weak to run.

When the bidding started again, a magnificent black male came up for sale. He brought a fantastic price. Another. Then a woman, with a heavy-lidded, sensuous cast to her features. She stood proud as a queen before the leering crowd.

I hope, Arielle thought, she can't understand what they're saying! Her own face was red with more than heat, and she hated Laffite for subjecting her to this.

Then there was a rustling sound. She looked up, astonished. A warm fragrant breeze had arisen, moving through the leaves like music. Overhead, the atmosphere had turned saffron. But beyond the trees was a black sky.

"Look," she whispered.

Laffite turned to face the sight. She could see a strange half-smile upon his lips, then she was blinded as a shrieking wind swept in from the gulf, whipping her hair into her eyes. Trees bent in half, thunder rolled and crashed, lightning darted, spitting, from the sky. From the waiting slaves came a moaning as from damned souls.

Arielle staggered, skirts caught by the wind, as Laffite released her. "Round up the slaves," he bel-



lowed, his voice swallowed by the gale. "Dominique! Beluchil! Watch them! Don't let them escape!"

Then he was gone, and she stood alone in the swirling maelstrom of the storm, his last word ringing in her ears. *Escape.*

Stumbling, she found a tree, and crouched in the lee of it, fumbling with the buttons of her gown. She stepped out of it, her undergarments immediately soaked through by the lashing rain that now rode on the wind. A bright flash of lightning showed her that the crowd was running from the gale. Thunder roared again. There was a smell of ozone, of smoke. And above the storm rose the screams of the blacks in chains.

Gritting her teeth, Arielle faced into the wind. It would lead her in the right direction. Blinded by rain and flying debris, deafened by the roar of the storm, she fought her way to the far side of the *chênière*. She clung to a tree to avoid being swept from her feet, then struggled to another, half-drowned by the sheeting rain.

Then there was a lull, another conflagration of lightning that seemed to light up the world, and she saw the dead tree Louis described, pointing its two fingers to the sky.

She made her way to it and clung there, waiting for the next illumination to show her the boat at the water's edge. But at the next flash of light, Arielle saw a tall, faceless man standing beside her, silhouetted against the light. He reached out for her—

"No," she whispered. "No!"

Whirling, she tried to run, but the dark figure caught her. She was pulled against the cold surface of a wet fisherman's slicker; arms wrapped about her

in a viselike grip. There was a moment of numbness, of shock, then she began to fight, clawing at the face above her.

She heard him curse above the storm as he lifted one hand to shield his face. The arm at her waist loosened a little, and she wriggled from his grip, the material of her shift rending as he caught at her. Then she was free, but only for a brief space. She slipped in the wetness beneath her feet and fell.

Strong arms scooped her up, picking her up like a child. One arm cradled her, the other grasped her flailing hands. She twisted, sinking her teeth into his wrist, and she found herself set down; free, but not for long. Her head rocked back with a resounding slap.

Dazed, Arielle was lifted once more in those implacable arms. A few stumbling steps, and she was dumped into a small boat. She lay there panting, bruised, half-drowned, her ears ringing with a scream of the wind.

She was being kidnapped again. *Gambi*, she thought—returned for his revenge. She would rather die than be in his hands!

Then she heard the splash of oars as the boat moved out from the shore.

Andre Villeré, at the oars, cursed Jean Laffite, the girl, and himself. He was a fool to have undertaken this errand in the first place. He was risking his goals and perhaps his life in order to rescue the wife of a man he had reason to hate; a woman who had done her best to destroy him with her spying.

His idea of using the predicted storm as cover was a good one, but the shrieking, rain-filled gale ruled out communication. How could he get it

across to the girl that he was taking her home—to the dragon's nest where she belonged. For that matter, with the inland waters swollen, turning the swampland into a sea of water, would he be able to find the landmarks to guide them there?

For the first time in his life, he had struck a woman. It was not a good feeling, despite his blood-streaked wrist. He looked toward her, feeling the pirogue shift. A flash showed her figure delineated against the sky—and there was a splash.

Arielle had jumped overboard.

With a curse, Andre shipped the oars and stripped off his slicker, diving into the water. The fool! The little fool! Had he lost her?

His flailing hand touched something in the darkness. Arielle's floating hair. Gripping it, he managed to get her face above water. He towed her back toward the boat. As he reached it, she began to struggle again. He fought for a hold on the pirogue with one hand, trying to support her with the other, swearing as she almost slipped away. His boots were filled with water, his wet clothes encumbering him. She would drown them both!

Forgetting the boat, he turned his full attention to Arielle, one hand gripping the hair at the back of her head, the other drawn back into a fist. One solid blow and she went limp.

He heaved her small body into the pirogue, and clung to the side for a moment, too exhausted to help himself. Finally, wearily, he managed to climb aboard. He found some rope under the seat, and tied her, hand and foot. He'd be damned if she'd pull anything like this again!

Returning to the oars, he watched grimly for another bolt of lightning to illuminate his surround-

ings. Then, leaving The Temple behind him, he began to row, moving with the gale.

Tonight, he'd struck a woman, not once, but twice. And the way he felt now, weary, soaked to the skin, if she caused any more trouble when she came to—he just might do it again.

## Chapter 19

Arielle regained consciousness slowly. She was soaked through, but she was warm, lying on something soft, with a feeling of drifting—the sounds of water around her. She seemed to be in a black tunnel. There was a strong smell of fish.

So this was what drowning was like, dark and peaceful.

She tried to move, discovering she had been bound. And she felt an ache along her jawline. Her neck was stiff and sore. She fumbled at the material beneath her. A pile of fishnets, sodden, but cushioning her body from the hard wood beneath.

She was still a captive, back in the pirogue she'd leaped from. And she was not in a tunnel, but covered by a man's oilskin slicker.

Moving her head, she managed to nudge the

thing from her eyes. The storm had blown over. There was a sky full of stars. She couldn't see the figure at the oars, and she had no desire to attract his attention.

It was not Gambi, she decided, but someone set to watch her. She would be returned to Grande Terre. Sick with exhaustion and hopelessness, she forced herself to relax and finally slept.

She didn't know when Andre Villeré left the oars to study her sleeping face. He had begun to be concerned about the effects of the blow. Perhaps he'd struck her too hard. Her serene features and even breathing reassured him. He looked at her for a long time, feeling odd emotions stir inside of him. Then, reminding himself that female spies came in attractive packages, he drew the slicker to shield her eyes, and returned to his chore.

He was chilled from his foray into the water. His water-logged boots felt most unpleasant to his feet. And worse, though the storm had been brief, it was as he'd feared. The storm had changed the face of the swamp. There would be little difficulty in crossing the bay, but would he be able to find the network of waterlanes he must follow?

The sky began to gray into dawn, and he saw a column of smoke rising from a small island in the distance. He studied, it, frowning. Smoke meant fire, and fire meant life. It could be the cookfire of a Creole trapper or fisherman. There were many of them living in hidden communities along the waterways. And most of them owed allegiance to Jean Laffite. It was possible, too, that a criminal, or an escaped slave might be hiding out on the island.

In his situation either might be a danger, but a long journey stretched ahead. It would be most

uncomfortable in net clothing, and without a way to cook the provisions he'd stored in the rear of the pirogue. He decided to take a chance.

As he neared the island, he could see the smoke was not from the blaze of a man-made fire. Lightning had struck a great oak, splitting it almost in half. The bottom of the pirogue dragged a little as he beached it, catching on vegetation normally above the waterline. He looked quickly at his passenger, hidden beneath the holds of his fisherman's coat. She didn't stir.

Stepping on land, Andre walked its perimeter, killing several snakes that had been driven to higher ground. A swamp rat squealed at his approach and ran into the underbrush. Above him, squirrels chattered in anger at his intrusion. Satisfied that there was no danger here, Andre approached the riven tree. Digging dried pulpwood from a fallen log with his knife, he carefully transferred some of the smoldering material to his pile of splinters, blowing it into flame. Then he added twigs and branches. Though they were wet from the storm, he soon had a creditable fire going.

It was time to awaken his unwilling guest.

He went to the pirogue and bent above her, feeling a jolt as he remembered how it felt to hold her in his arms. For a moment, he was tempted to wake her with a kiss. Instead, he jerked the slicker away. She sat up, eyes dazed with sleep.

Andre Villeré!

But he had left Grande Terre several days ago. Had he already planned this then? Dear God, why! And where was he taking her? She looked with dazed eyes at her unfamiliar surroundings, then flinched as he reached for her.

"Dammit," he swore, "I'm just going to untie you!"

She shivered as his hands fumbled at her bare wrists. Then he bent to the ropes at her feet. She saw the scratches on his face, the wrist that was puffed and swelling.

When he had finished, he stood above her with folded arms as she tried to rub some circulation into her cramped limbs. His dark eyes were forbidding.

"I am going to talk, and you are going to listen. There is a fire. I will remain here. You will go to the fire and dry your clothes." His eyes raked her body. "It should not take long," he said mockingly.

Arielle reddened and brought her arms up to cover herself. It dawned on her that she was alone on an island, half-naked, in the presence of a man who was not her husband.

"When your things are dry," he continued relentlessly, "then you will cook breakfast. There will be no more hysterical, female outbursts; no more attempts to run away. If you do, so help me God, I'll leave you in the swamps and let you find your own way home."

"Home?" she echoed the word. She could not bring herself to believe what he had said. "Home?"

"Home!" he said roughly. "And I hope you have sense enough to stay there after this."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she reached up, catching his hands. "I didn't know! I didn't know where you were taking me! Thank you! Oh, thank you—"

He jerked at her touch, flinging her hands from him. "Don't thank me," he rasped. "I don't give a damn what happens to you! Thank Jean Laffite!"

"Laffite?" Bewilderment shone through her



tears. "You mean he arranged this? Why would he let me go?"

"For the same reason I would, I suppose. To be rid of you!" He turned, lifted an oilskin-wrapped packet of food supplies from the boat, and strode back to the fire.

Arielle got to her feet and stepped out on land, reeling a little from the night spent in a cramped position. She approached the fire. Andre Villeré had unwrapped his supplies and set them on a stump to await her. When she arrived, he scowled at her again.

"Hang your things on the limb above the fire. You can cook while they're drying. And don't be concerned about being spied upon. That is your province, not mine."

He stalked off, and she stared after him, anger stirring. One would think she was the traitor, not he. In going to Claiborne, she'd merely done her duty as a citizen. And because of it, she had been subjected to abduction, imprisonment, and humiliation at the hands of his renegade comrades.

She closed her lips tightly. It made no difference. The important thing was that she would soon be reunited with Mindy. From that point, she must begin to plan a life for the two of them, away from Madam Villeré. For now she need not defend her actions to a surly fellow like Andre Villeré.

Had Laffite really plotted to get rid of her? She felt strangely uneasy at the thought. Why? There had been times when his intentions toward her had seemed almost—ardent. If he sent her home, there must have been a reason. Perhaps he felt it would be easier to deal with the English without a spy in camp.

Arielle tossed her head. She could endure An-

dre's temper for the next few days. The important thing was to get home.

She removed her shift and drawers, hanging them on the designated limb. As wet as they were, she probably looked less naked without them. She'd had to peel them away from her flesh.

Kneeling close to the fire, she let her naked body take in its warmth. Then, remembering Andre's command, she set about the chore of cooking breakfast.

Rummaging through the small pile of provisions, she found a skillet, a slab of bacon, coffee. There was also a knife.

She hefted the blade. It was large, heavy. Her first impulse was to hide it, then she realized how foolish that was. If Andre Villeré intended to do her harm, he would have done it before now. She had to admit it was good he was there. For she was hopelessly lost. Villeré-in-the-Swamp could lie in any direction.

Slicing the bacon, she knelt beside the fire, turning it, while the coffee boiled, emitting a mouth-watering fragrance. It seemed strange to be cooking without a stitch to cover her. She might well be Eve, preparing a meal for Adam.

The thought brought a furious blush as she remembered her erotic dreams in which Andre Villeré figured. She would emerge cured of them from this adventure. There was nothing romantic about an evil-tempered, high-handed brute. He was no Adam, that was certain!

That conclusion seemed hard to remember as she sat across the fire from him a short time later. Her clothes had dried, and she had donned the waterproof slicker for good measure.

"You'll be miserable in that," he warned. He

shrugged as she ignored his remark, and set to eating his breakfast with a hearty appetite.

He had removed his shirt. It hung drying on the branch above the fire. His wet boots sat nearby. Barefoot, bare-chested, he looked incredibly handsome. She had a compulsion, in spite of her anger and dislike, to smooth his tousled hair; to touch the muscles that rippled beneath his bronzed skin.

They ate in silence. Finally he rose, gathered his belongings, kicked out the fire and without a word headed for the boat. She followed him. There was nothing else to do.

The sun seemed to spring into action at signs of the continuance of their journey. It blazed down with a fury that set the swampland steaming as they moved from the bay and into the waterlanes. From time to time, they moved through patches of mist rising from the water. Then their world settled down to a dull, pounding, smothering heat.

Arielle clung to the oil-skin slicker as long as she could, then had to remove it. At least her underthings were dry now. She wondered at the way Andre Villeré kept up the pace, moving from oars to pole as the situation demanded. He seemed so sure of himself. In complete command.

Andre Villeré was anything but sure of himself at this point. The route still looked unfamiliar, the water level higher, the grasses still matted down by the fury of the passing storm.

Worse, he was unsure of his feelings toward the girl. He still kept visualizing the innocent-eyed child he'd rescued from a snake; whom he had kissed before leaving her in the cane field. He had tried to scare her, to prevent further expeditions to his home. It hadn't worked. Twice, since that day, she'd gotten herself into a godawful mess.

If she were spying, as Gambi claimed, she was pretty damned inept at it. If she were a wanton, bored and hunting a man, as he'd decided that first night at Grande Terre, she showed no signs of it now. But then sitting small and docile in the prow of the boat, her dark hair fanning around bare shoulders, she bore no resemblance to the wildcat who'd bitten him last night.

Troubled at his urge to leave the oars and take the girl in his arms, he reminded himself that she was his stepbrother's wife, and that she was responsible for Cleone's death; Cleone, whom he had loved as a sister. She'd proved herself to be nothing but an interfering troublemaker. Even now she was a danger to Laffite. And he was risking his plans in returning her—she would surely talk.

But that was beside the point. He had the responsibility for two lives. The girl's and his own. If he made an error in judgment, nothing would matter. Their bones would lie in the swamp.

Arielle, too, was doing some soul-searching. She regarded the man thoughtfully, seeing, in his stead, a young boy, running away from home, driven by his stepmother. A pity he had to fall in with evil companions. He might have been different.

She went over their first meeting in her mind; the gentleness with which he had treated her; the pleasant atmosphere of his home; the way he'd held her close before leaving her. She shut her eyes, remembering the feelings he'd aroused, then tried to recall the humiliation she'd felt when he had gone. Her memory seemed to bog down. Grimly, she began again; the way he'd rescued her from the snake, his gentleness—

It was a long and silent journey.

## Chapter 20

Toward dusk, Andre Villeré breathed a sigh of relief. His surroundings were beginning to make sense to him. Emerging from a grass-choked water-lane, they had entered a clear space. In the middle of the small pondlike lake, starred with storm-bruised lilies, was an island of shell. Only two trees graced its crown. And he remembered those trees. Once, years before, he had swung a hammock there.

Here they would spend the night. The night insects were already becoming voracious, and Arielle had donned the slicker against their attacks. A fire would discourage them. And if he remembered correctly, on the far side of the island, there was a depression where water collected after a rain.

He beached the pirogue and led Arielle to the small fresh water pool. Collecting several canteens

of it, he left her to bathe. He built up a fire from the coals he'd carried. Indian fashion, in a cooking pot lined with leaves, then he put the coffee to boil, went in search of fresh food.

Arielle had stripped off her few garments, and was reveling in her bath. The cool water after the day's heat felt better than any scented tub. She washed her hair, enjoying the way it floated around her as she lay back in the shallow water. And finally, she left the pool, and let the soft warm air dry her body. She dressed, reluctantly, and sat at the edge of the water, combing her damp hair with her fingers, feeling it spring to life as it dried.

And then she heard the shot.

She sprang to her feet, heart beating like a trip-hammer. Her mind crawled with suppositions: A criminal! An escaped slave! Pirate! Snake!

She snatched up a piece of broken limb to use as a club and ran toward the fire. Andre! Dear God! Andre!

Andre Villeré, kneeling beside the squirrel he'd shot, looked up as she burst into the clearing, club in hand. He leaped to his feet and walked toward her as she stood, faltering, seeing him unharmed.

Reaching out, he caught at her weapon, twisting it from her fingers. "You little fool! There's still a hell of a long way to go! What would you gain by knocking me over the head—even if you could? You'd never make it without me!"

Arielle stood mutinous and silent before his anger. She would never let him know she had feared for his safety! Never! Let him think what he would!

While the squirrel roasted, Andre brought armfuls of Spanish moss, making two beds near the fire. Later he would cover the coals with leaves to make

a smudge to keep the insects away. He performed his work in silence. They ate without speaking. When they had finished, he scowled at her.

"I think we have some talking to do. I agreed to get you home. It isn't a job I especially enjoy. You haven't got a chance in hell of getting there on your own, so I suggest you cooperate." When Arielle didn't answer, he moodily kicked at a shell. A pretty thing of ivory and lavender, it broke beneath his foot.

"Another thing," he continued, "you will need an excuse for disappearing, a reason for having been gone so long."

"I have a reason," she interrupted, furiously. He ignored her outburst and continued.

"Several years ago, there was a slave at Villeré-in-the-Swamp. He wasn't quite right in the head, but he was harmless." Andre went on to provide a description of the man. Six feet tall, about two hundred pounds, very black, limped a little. He had been beaten, and had run away. He'd built a little cabin hidden away in the swamps. Andre had looked in on him from time to time, and had finally found him dead of snakebite. He had buried him.

"It would be logical that he might have abducted you. And, crazy as he was, old Matt—Matthew—wouldn't have hurt you. The story would do him no harm now that he's gone."

"You're suggesting that I lie?" Arielle was outraged. "That I put the blame on some poor black man? I—I'll be damned if I will! I was captured by Laffite's men. Kept prisoner. I intend to tell Ramon! To go straight to the Governor! I intend to brand Laffite for what he is, a murderer and a traitor!"

"You were captured because you were some-

where you had no business being!" There was a white ring about Andre's mouth. "You were well treated considering that you were responsible for Laffite's arrest. I can't force you to keep your mouth shut. I can only advise it. Your story might do irreparable damage to the whole country—"

"It depends on what one wants for the country, doesn't it?" Her tone was mocking, insolent. "You want one thing, Ramon wants another. I prefer to stand with my husband."

He had his hands on her, shaking her. "You *are* a Marquez, aren't you! Spying, conniving little bitch! You—"

He stopped. She had struck him across the face with an open hand, leaving the print of her fingers.

"And you're a dog in the manger," she taunted him. "You hate Ramon because he's got what you think you should have had! He stayed at home and earned your father's affection, while you ran off and joined a pack of lawless criminals. I will not listen to this! You will not malign my husband's name!"

He seized her roughly, forcing her backward. "Won't I? Perhaps I'll do even more! Everything for the young prince," he mocked. "The best of everything. Clothes, books, the plantation that was rightfully mine! Nothing shabby or used for Master Ramon! Maybe I'll send him a present! For the first time in his life, he'll know what it is to be content with used goods!"

Sensing his intent, she tried to escape, a pulse hammering in her throat, suffocating her. "No," she whispered. "No."

He forced her backward to the bed of moss he'd prepared for her. Too late, she twisted, bringing up a knee. He evaded it with a devilish laugh, neatly tripping her. She fell and he was upon her,



hot mouth seeking, hands ranging her body as she fought.

When she stopped struggling, she didn't remember. There was a time when she had answered his passion, that, she knew. The stars shimmered above her. And there was pain.

He left her, walking from the fire into darkness. "Good God," she heard him say. "Good God!"

Then he returned to look down at her. "You are not Ramon's wife," he said flatly. "You never have been."

Arielle closed her eyes and turned her face away. Andre looked down at her small figure, bared shoulders bruised, mouth swollen from his brutal kisses, and felt suddenly sick at what he had done.

Getting the slicker, he spread it over her with trembling hands, then went to his own bed.

Arielle had remained untouched until tonight. A virgin. Ramon? What in the hell was the matter with the man? For that matter—what had gotten into *him*? His anger had flared, then another emotion took over. Before he could stop himself, he'd launched his brutal attack.

Then it had become quite a different act. An act of urgency, of need, an act of love. For a moment, she had seemed to respond. And then he had discovered her secret.

He tried to sleep, but the memory of the way she'd felt against him surged in his veins. He wanted to lie down beside her, hold her, comfort her. And then, God help him, he wanted to arouse her slowly, tenderly, to make love to her again.

Damn Laffite! Damn the girl! Damn a hopeless romantic named Andre Villeré—who coveted his brother's wife.

The next morning he woke to find Arielle gone. Panic-stricken, he hurried to the boat. It was still there. Then he remembered the pool. He found her there, waist deep in water, her wet shoulders gleaming ivory in the sun, her long hair shining with sparkling drops, like diamonds. Her face was bemused. She did not see him. He stood, rooted to the spot, fighting the urge to go to her, then backed silently away.

When she returned to the fireside, he had breakfast prepared. They did not speak, avoiding each other's eyes. Somehow she had managed to repair her ruined clothing, using small twigs to skewer the major tears.

If she could pretend last night never happened, then so could he.

Nature outdid herself on the day's journeying. The molten sun of the previous day satisfied itself with soft illumination. The biting insects were conspicuously absent, and the landscape was a mist of gold and blue and green; the air filled with a gentle wafting fragrance.

Andre maneuvered the pirogue along the winding ways, vigorously at first, then the beauty of his surroundings, Arielle's presence, lulled him into a dream. He and the girl were alone in this watery world. She was his love. And tonight—

He set his jaw. Tonight he would not touch her.

Arielle, too, was lost in fantasy. She went over the events of the previous night, trying to hate him. She could not. The thought of his touch ran through her in a shudder of delight. She felt dizzy, her heart bursting. If he came to her again? It must not happen!

Their conversation was commonplace. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you."

"If you're tired, I think I could row."

"No need."

The scratches on his face gave her an obscure pleasure. They were her marks, she had put them there. She couldn't know that he eyed the fading bruise on her chin with much the same feeling, mingled with remorse.

Their friction was forgotten. Only the memory of what had happened on the island pulsed between them.

Another night filled with soft stars and a golden moon. Another island. Arielle and Andre went about the chores of cooking, eating, clearing up for the morning. The beds of moss were spread and waiting, but still they sat by the fire, reluctant to break the spell of the enchanted night.

Finally, Andre rose. Instead of going to his bed, he took Arielle's hand, lifting her to her feet. His features, gilded by the moonlight, were drawn, stern, his dark eyes shadowed.

"Arielle."

A warm wave of feeling swept over her, and she caught her breath, swaying toward him. His hands touched her bruised shoulders, tender now, and she lifted her face to his.

"Arielle," he said again. Then his mouth was on hers in a hot sweet flowering. With a groan, he held her close, feeling her urgency as she pressed against him. God in Heaven!

Shivering from his efforts to control his passions, Andre led her to her bed of moss. She did not release his helping hand, but lay looking up at him,

eyes glistening with tears. The pulse in her fingers matched his own.

"Andre?" It was a question, and an invitation.

With a harsh sound in his throat, Andre Villeré went to his knees beside her. His hands touched her face, her slim shoulders, tracing the lines of a body that arched toward him. His heart was thundering, shaking him. Her heartbeat, beneath his exploring fingers, was racing out of control.

I've got to stop, he thought wildly. I didn't mean for this to happen—

Then his mouth sought hers. Her lips parted, answering, and he was lost. The past did not matter, nor the future. They came together in a fusion that was natural, tender, beautiful beyond belief, need matching need.

Afterward, they held each other close, bemused by the wonder of it. Surely it had never been like this for another woman, another man. Andre, coming to his senses, stumbly tried to apologize, and she put a small hand over his lips. With a groan, he turned to her again.

Arching to meet his passion, Arielle thought, I'm not sorry! I'm glad! I'm glad!

Finally, sated with love, they slept, and the moon covered their bodies with a blanket of gold.

## Chapter 21

The next day was a repetition of the previous one, warm sun and a soft, flower-filled wind. Waking with her face pressed to Andre's chest, Arielle prayed that they would not move on. That they could remain here forever.

Oh, God! She'd forgotten Mindy.

Andre was more realistic. He'd wakened earlier, to lie savoring the feel of the girl in his arms. He wanted to keep her for his own. But she was another man's wife, and he had a mission to fulfill. If she asked once, to stay with him, he knew he'd throw it all up. Maybe take her north, where they could pose as man and wife and build a life together.

She did not ask.

Leaving, they both looked back at their enchanted island. Arielle's eyes were wet with tears. She thought of the bed of moss that still lay beside

the quenched fire. At the next storm it would scatter to the winds.

They moved through the morning's rainbow mists, and into a mellow day. It was like a voyage of discovery for both of them. Big swamp butterflies hovered above the water, on pulsing wings of purple and gold. Birds, startled at their passing, soared into the skies like notes of music. There was a sense of timelessness, as if their journeying might go on into eternity. It was enough, for now, to touch; to look on each other with eyes of love.

When they stopped for the night, there was no dissembling. Andre gathered moss for one bed, not two. Their first act of love had been born of violence. The second night was one of loving tenderness. And this last night of their journey, they turned to each other in desperation, straining to get closer, to become one person, one racing heart, one self.

Arielle pressed her hands on the back of Andre's shoulders, feeling the muscles move beneath them as he kissed her. How did one leave a man whose body she'd memorized?

"What is going to become of us?" she whispered.

He answered honestly. "I don't know."

She made a sobbing sound, and he caught her to him. "Good God, Arielle! Leave him! He's not a husband to you. I'm sure of that now!"

"I can't," she said, dully. "I owe him too much." In a low voice, she recounted her mother's death, her life in her stepfather's house, and the way Ramon had rescued her. "He asked me to marry him," she said honestly, "and I don't know why."

Lying on his back, his hands pillowing his head, Andre pondered the question. Madam Villeré had

probably pressured Ramon to marry in order to be rid of Cleone. Poor devil! He wondered if Arielle had ever guessed—

She had not. He could tell as she explained her ill-fated attempt to help Cleone.

"I still don't think Davis beat the girl," he said, a harsh note in his voice. "I don't think you believe it, either."

She did not, but she could not tell him so. She had to force herself to remember that the man she loved was her husband's enemy. If he knew the truth about Madam Villeré—he must not. There must be no more bad blood between the members of the family. "It doesn't matter, she whispered. "Cleone's dead. Andre, the warning that night—why did she send me to you?"

He thought he knew the answer to that, too. Proud Cleone loved Ramon to the end. Her love had been warped into a desire for vengeance. Her espionage, the way she'd sent Arielle into danger, had been her way of evening the score.

He could not tell Arielle that. He couldn't tell her Ramon fathered Cleone's child. Not when he was sending her back to him.

"Perhaps she trusted you," he said. Then, "Don't talk anymore, Arielle. I don't want to think about anything but loving you." He buried his face against her breast. It felt wet, and she held him to her in an agony of love.

Finally, they slept, clinging to each other with the desperation of lost children.

As if it sensed their parting and refused to allow them one more pleasant day, the sun became a blast furnace as they continued on their journey. The waters were brown and sullen beneath the pirogue. The roots of water plants tangled, imped-

ing their path. It was already dusk when they crossed the river and headed into the bayous that would lead to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Here they were beset by stinging insects. Arielle fought at them, touching her welted face and shoulders.

"I will look dreadful," she said, her laughter close to tears.

"Perhaps that will be better," he said somberly.

Did he really believe she would tell that fabricated story? That she would say she'd been taken prisoner by a crazed slave? She couldn't lie! But neither could she betray Andre.

"Where are you going after you leave me?" she asked in a small voice, daring to voice a thought of the future at last.

He stood tall above her, using the pole to move the pirogue. She sensed, rather than saw his shrug of hopelessness. "Back to Grande Terre, I suppose."

To Grande Terre, to deal with the pirate, Lafite—and treat with the English. "Please, Andre. Don't go," she pleaded. "You have your home. You can lead a respectable life, I—I could see you—"

"Good God! What do you take me for!" He sounded angry. "Do you think I'd give up all I believe in to sneak around behind a husband's back, waiting for a few crumbs of your love? Lying, making excuses! Hell, no! What we've done was bad enough!"

"Was it bad?" Her quiet voice stopped his storming. He shipped the pole and knelt beside her, taking her in his arms.

"No, sweetheart. It was good. The best thing that ever happened to me. But we were in another world. It was something we couldn't fight, and that made it right. You were mine for a while, but I won't share you. I can't. Do you understand?"



She held to him, every nerve quivering. "Don't take me there yet," she begged. "Just one more night! Please Andre!"

"It wouldn't help." He gently disentangled her. "It would only make it harder for both of us. I'm going to take you home. You left in the darkness and you'll have to return in the dark. I don't want to be seen."

The wind came up as they approached Villeré-in-the-Swamp, dead leaves and twigs raining down on them. Mooring the boat beneath the arched bridge, Andre took Arielle's hand, leading her through the tangled undergrowth that led upward to the grounds. Numbly, she followed him around the side of the house to the gardens. "This is where I first saw you," he said gently. "Here is where we will say goodbye."

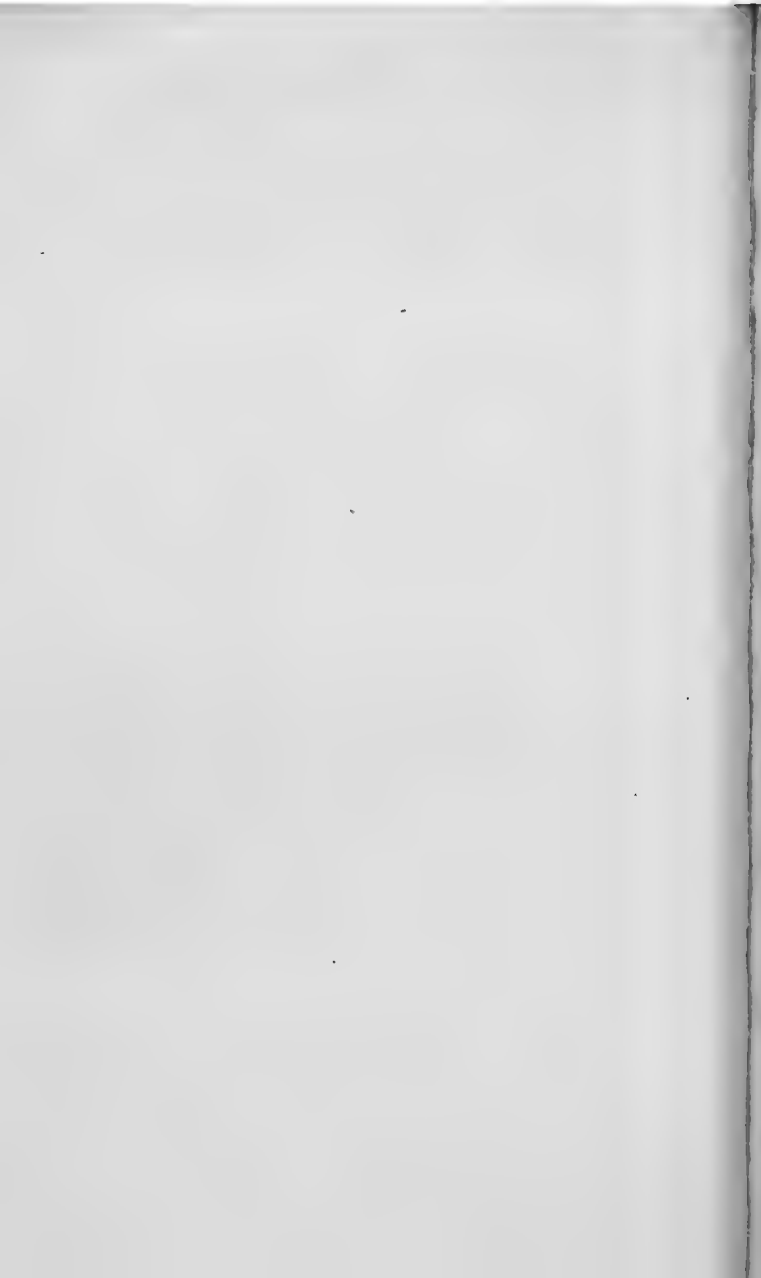
He kissed her mouth, gently, lingeringly, as her dark hair whipped around them in the wind. "Goodbye, my love."

Then he was gone. She stood for a moment, whimpering a little, her fingers pressed to her lips. Then she turned, coming face to face with Luisa.

"Arielle," her sister-in-law gasped. "It is you! My God! We thought you were dead!"

The world seemed to spin. Arielle reeled with it, and Luisa caught her arm, helping her into the house.

**BOOK III**  
**SWAMP THUNDER**



# Chapter 1

On the eve of Arielle's return, there had been a small private dinner in the Villeré dining room. It was by way of being a celebration, though few of the celebrants seemed enthusiastic. Madam Villeré was in her glory. The double wedding she'd planned for Christmas was well on its way to becoming reality. She'd had no doubts about coaxing Luisa to marry Edward. But Ramon, dear boy, had held out adamantly. Luckily, he had come to his senses. Only today, he'd asked Elizabeth Allingham to become his wife.

Mentally, she ran over the girl's good qualities. First, she was English, which would help Ramon in his career. She was wealthy, and certainly untouched and pure. Madam Villeré skimmed over Elizabeth's greatest virtue. She would be no threat to her own authority.

She lacked grace and beauty, but she would acquire those with marriage, which brought a self-assurance. In fact, she was positively glowing now.

If only Ramon wouldn't glower so! She tapped her son's arm with a pudgy, playful hand. "Look at your bride-to-be. She is shining with happiness."

Ramon looked, then looked away. Elizabeth's watery blue eyes were alight, red splotches adorning her bony features. Everything about her repelled him. Yet he had somehow managed to mutter a proposal of marriage, touching his lips to her dry cheek in a formal kiss when she accepted with a whinny of delight.

He hated Elizabeth, and he hated himself.

Dessert was brought, and he refused it. Elizabeth ate her own portion, and then his. Happiness, he thought grimly, had not affected her appetite.

Edward Allingham, on the other hand, had been unable to eat at all. Euphoric, now that Luisa would at last become his wife, the man babbled like a lunatic, gulping and bobbing as he talked of his plans for the years ahead.

Mindy and Thaddeus Lindenwood sat at the foot of the table. Both of them were wan and woe-begone. This afternoon, following Ramon's proposal, Elizabeth had swooped down on Mindy.

"You will live with us," she fluttered. "You will be my own dear daughter."

She had caught the child to her spinsterish bosom, unaware of the frog in Mindy's pinafore pocket. Neither the frog nor Elizabeth had enjoyed the situation.

Then, when the hubbub settled, Madam Villeré had a few points of her own to add. Of course, Coaley couldn't go with Mindy. Ramon and Elizabeth would be making a home in the city, where Mindy

would find friends of her own color. And dear Mr. Lindenwood, who had felt responsible for Mindy ever since Arielle's death, would be able to return to New York.

Mindy and Thaddeus had escaped, slipping to the tree-cave beside the arched bridge. Coaley had joined them, his small black face glum as Mindy wept on the old man's shoulder. "Take us with you," she begged.

Lindenwood tried to soothe her, his hands shaking. He would be lucky to make it home himself, he confessed. He had no money. If he did, he could not take Coaley. He was someone's property. It would be like stealing, and they would be hunted down.

He would be leaving in the morning.

Now, at the table, Mindy sat drowned in hopelessness. Old Thaddeus, reaching for her hand beneath the linen cloth, jumped as Madam Villeré called his name.

"We should have a toast to our young lovers," she said archly. "Surely you can give us some suitable quotation."

The old actor rose, his wine glass trembling in his hand. "*Some, Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps,*" he said. "*Much Ado About Nothing*, act three, scene one. Or perhaps this one, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: *Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind. And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.*"

He bowed, in his courtly manner and sat down. Elizabeth looked at him in confusion. Then she tapped her hands together in applause. "Most beautifully put," she enthused, "though I have never understood Shakespeare."

An embarrassed hush followed Elizabeth's

words. It was broken by the rattle of wind at the panes. Madam Villeré stood, relieved.

"I believe our storm has arrived," she said. "I must find Blanche and have her check the windows before the rain. I suggest we retire to the parlor then, for some entertainment. Elizabeth, will you sing?"

Elizabeth would, and did. Her high-pitched shrilling overrode the sounds of the storm outside. Mindy squinched herself into a tight little ball, wishing she could run away, out of earshot. Luisa shared her feelings.

Luisa's head had been aching all afternoon; an affliction she'd probably suffer the rest of her life, she thought mournfully, looking at the man she would marry in December. He leaned forward, Adam's apple bobbing, his protuberant eyes fixed upon his sister with pride.

Luisa stood, unnoticed, and slipped from the room. She longed for a place to hide. She went outside, her fear of darkness less than her revulsion at Edward's presence.

It was not as dark as she'd thought. The moon was high and pale, a gusting wind rattling the bushes and shrubs. She thought of going to the tree-cave, but it would be pitch black there. The idea of descending through the heavy growth along the bank was not appealing either. She rounded the house toward the garden.

The wind stilled for a moment, and she heard the sound of stealthy footsteps, a subdued whisper. Alarmed, she sought the shelter of a shrub, her heart fluttering in her throat as a shadow fell across the moonlight grass. Another.

She squinted her eyes as the gale increased, trying to identify the figures that followed the shad-

ows into the light. Andre Villeré! What was he doing here? And who was with him? A boy? No! An almost naked girl! A girl with long black hair that blew about her so that Luisa could hardly see her face.

Andre kissed the girl and was gone. Luisa stepped out into the clearing as the newcomer turned to face her.

Arielle! She was not dead! Not dead!

Luisa, her mind whirling with suppositions, helped her sister-in-law into the house, going through a rear door where she had the presence of mind to snatch up a cloak to cover Arielle's shredded undergarments. Then she led her into the parlor where Ramon sat turning the pages of a book while Elizabeth played and sang.

Elizabeth saw her first, her complexion turning a sickly green. She halted, mouth open, in mid-note. Ramon followed her gaze, and froze. Edward Allingham made a small gobbling sound. Mindy went into screaming hysterics, and Lindenwood tried to hold her. "Easy, child, easy—"

Ramon was finally able to move. He came toward her, taking her in his arms. His dark eyes were wet. "We thought you were dead, Arielle. We were sure of it. God in Heaven! Where have you been all this time?"

She pulled herself free of him and looked straight at Madam Villeré, who still stood transfixed. In a calm small voice, she said, "I was abducted by a slave who ran away from Villeré-in-the-Swamp—because he'd been whipped. His name was Matthew, and there was something wrong with his mind. He didn't hurt me. We had many interesting conversations—"

She stopped. Madam Villeré was gasping like a



fish, one hand at her throat, the features below the high-piled white hair empurpled. Ramon left Arielle's side and hurried toward his mother. He caught her as she fell.

Mindy ran, sobbing, into Arielle's waiting arms.

## Chapter 2

In the confusion that followed Madam Villeré's collapse, Arielle was all but forgotten. The Allinghams made a hasty departure, then Lindenwood took over, telling Mindy to stop asking questions, to find Shug, since Blanche would be busy attending her mistress, and tell her hot water for a bath would be needed in Arielle's chambers.

The frail old man and the child helped her up the carpeted stairs, one at either side. She felt a tremendous surge of love for them both, and was grateful for their support. The rigors of her journey, and her grief at parting from Andre, had caught up with her. The look of blazing hatred she'd encountered in her mother-in-law's eyes before the woman had fallen had drained her further.

They reached her familiar room. Mindy began

her questions once more, and Thaddeus said, crossly, "Let her be! Time enough for that in the morning."

Shug arrived with hot water, her black face turning ashen gray at the sight of her young mistress returned from the dead. It took some convincing to prove that she wasn't a haunt.

Mindy obliged her with the story Arielle had told upon entering. The tale of how she'd been kidnapped by a crazy slave named Matthew.

"I 'members him," Shug said thoughtfully. Her eyes touched on Arielle's bruised chin. "Figgered he was a hahmless ol' coot. Wouldn't swat a fly."

"He didn't hurt me. Just kept me a prisoner. I couldn't get away."

"Howcum you is back, then?" Shug still looked doubtful.

A good question. Best to stay as close to Andre's story as possible. "He died. Snakebite. I buried him." Arielle removed the cloak Luisa had thrown over her shoulders. Mindy gasped at her sister's scanty attire; at the welts and scratches she'd acquired on the last day of her trip through the water-lanes.

"You been in the swamp, fo' sure," Shug said dismally. "Good thing ole Matt done gone to Glory. Massa Ramon kill him daid."

Mindy hovered while Arielle bathed. She insisted on brushing her sister's dark hair into a silken cloud, and kept touching her as if she were afraid she'd disappear.

"Stop yo' peskiness," Shug grumped. "Yo' sister's plumb wore out. Oughtta git she-se'f to bed."

The child looked woebegone. Arielle reached out to her. Mindy seemed to have grown taller and thinner since her absence. She had lost some of her

natural exuberance. The blue eyes were strained in her sober face.

"Mindy, would you like to stay with me to-night?"

The girl's face lit up, then she looked at the big bed. "Your husband—?" It was a question.

"Ramon and Luisa will be busy with their mother tonight. I doubt if they'll leave her."

Mindy burst into tears again. "I hope she dies!"

"Mindy!" Arielle looked up to see Shug taking in Mindy's words with an expression of avid curiosity. "Thank you, Shug. You may go now."

"You needs anything, you call ole Shug." The woman bobbed her head and went out. Arielle turned her attention to Mindy once more. The child was still crying.

"What is it, honey? That was a dreadful thing to say! Has—has she been unkind to you?"

Mindy sniffled and scrubbed at her eyes. "She was making Luisa marry that old Edward Allingham. And your husband had to marry creepy old Elizabeth. I was s'posed to go live with them in New Orleans and be their little girl. She told Thaddeus to go home. He's going to leave in the morning, and he doesn't have any money. And she lets Hawkins hurt Trill."

The words came out in such a rush that Arielle had difficulty assembling them in her mind.

"I can't account for Luisa," she said, finally. "But Ramon cannot marry Elizabeth, since he has a wife. I'm home, and I'm not leaving you again, ever! You go right now and tell Thaddeus he's staying. Then get your nightdress and come back. We will work all this out somehow."

Mindy's eyes danced as she flew to do Arielle's bidding.

Arielle lay back against her pillow, her fists clenched. She'd had no right to reprimand Mindy for voicing the thoughts she herself held inside her mind. She remembered Cleone, Junie—

The door opened, and someone entered. Mindy? So soon? A hand pushed the bed curtains away, and Ramon's face, strained with worry, looked down at her.

"This is not much of a welcome, I fear," he said, haltingly. "I'm afraid that the shock was too much for poor Mamacita."

"How is she?"

"Not well at all. This happened once before, the day you disappeared. Mindy and Coaley found a bloodied candlestick behind the laundry, and she just—toppled over. She loves you very much—"

Arielle bit her lip. Then the old woman knew she had been witnessed! No wonder her reappearance had caused such a reaction. Arielle was no longer the frightened child who came to Villeré-in-the-Swamp as a bride. She had a hold over her mother-in-law, and she intended to use it—at the proper time.

She flinched as Ramon's hand touched her hair, smoothing it gently. "I've often come in here at night, imagining you here like this," he said in an odd, husky voice. "I didn't know what I'd lost until you were gone from me."

She looked back at him, half-hypnotized by the intensity of his dark eyes. Surely, he wasn't going to—

Mindy broke in with a banging of doors, her nightdress over her arm. "I told him," she said triumphantly. "He said he would stay if you needed him." She stopped short at the sight of Ramon bent above her sister's bed, her face going blank and still.

"Mindy's staying with me tonight," Arielle said. "I know you will be occupied with your mother."

Ramon looked dazed. "Yes," he said. "Yes." He touched her cheek with his lips. "I just wanted to tell you, I'm so glad you're home."

That night, Arielle lay with Mindy cradled in her arms. The child slept soundly, possibly the first good night's sleep she'd had in a long time. She wondered if this arrangement might be continued for some time. The look of need in Ramon's eyes had frightened her.

Did he intend to exercise his husbandly rights at last? And could she endure it, after Andre? Where was Andre now, and was he thinking of her? Slow tears rolled down her cheeks to settle in Mindy's golden curls.

Andre Villeré had gone first to his own home, walking sadly through the empty rooms, taking a long look at his neglected garden.

Then he returned for the pirogue. The house to which Arielle had come home seemed to blaze with light. Apparently she had been royally welcomed.

Boarding the boat, he took to the bayous, winding a way into the swamps behind his home. There he located a small cabin that listed crazily, hidden by vegetation on a small knoll.

He entered, built a small fire, and cooked a meal. While it was cooking, he proceeded to give the long-vacated shack an air of being recently occupied. He had a length of ribbon from Arielle's shift; a scrap of cloth that had caught in the splintered wood of the pirogue, a twig that had blown into her hair, entangling several long dark strands when she removed it.

He ate his meal, staring soberly into the fire,

wishing she sat beyond it. Then he carefully stamped out the flames, covering the coals with ashes. They would be dead by morning. The scent of food would linger, covering the musty smell of a place long uninhabited.

He went outside and stood for a moment at Matt's grave. "Sorry, old fellow," he said. It was a shame to blacken the man's name, but perhaps where he was now it made no difference.

He returned to the pirogue and sat for a moment, his face in his hands, thinking of Arielle. The fact that Ramon had never touched her was all that kept him sane.

He stood up and began to pole his way through the bayous, returning to Grande Terre.

In the days that followed, Madam Villeré's life hung in the balance. And Arielle, with what she considered a stroke of luck, was ill of a fever gained on her trip through the swamps; perhaps due to the biting insects on the last leg of the journey.

She alternately fevered and chilled. Shug stood over her, militantly, banishing visitors, even being short with her master, who came often, his dark eyes worried.

"She be all right. She needs to res' up, don' need no man foolin' aroun', Massa Ramon!"

Mindy was allowed in at intervals. Arielle woke from a restless sleep to find the child perched beside her. "I woke you up," Mindy said. "You had a bad dream. You kept talking about Laffite, and you wanted a knife."

Arielle's fingers plucked at the sheet covering her, as she sought for an explanation. "It was a bad dream! I'm glad I don't remember it. Mindy—how is Madam Villeré?"

"Better. She can't walk or talk yet, but her eyes get mad. I heard Ramon tell Luisa he had to go back to New Orleans in the morning." The child left the bed and skipped to the door. "I'm going to go find Coaley."

Arielle sat up, surprised to find that she felt so much better. Her forehead was cool to the touch, and she could think clearly. With Shug's help, she was dressed and in a chair by the window when Ramon came in.

His report was much the same as Mindy's, except for an additional bit of information. He'd had a company of men comb the swamps. Old Matthew's shack had been found, with signs that she'd been held prisoner there. They had also discovered the grave.

"It must have been hell for you," he said quietly. "I feel responsible for not having searched farther afield. But we were so sure you were dead." His voice broke, and he fell to his knees before her, burying his face in her lap.

"Forgive me! And forgive me for not being a husband to you all this time. There were reasons I can't explain. But it is all changed now. Arielle—"

"You were quite prepared to marry Elizabeth." Her tone was cool, low. His head jerked up, eyes suffused with guilt.

"I had hoped you wouldn't know. I suppose Mindy told you?" At her nod, he said, "I didn't want to marry her, Arielle. I dislike her. But my mother—," he stopped, reddening. "—I needed a wife," he finished lamely.

"As you needed one when you married me?"

He braced himself and looked at her levelly, his gaze dark and sincere. "I married you for two reasons. You needed help. I wanted to please my moth-



er. Then I became—fond of you. But something stood between us. I can't tell you what it was, except—it had something to do with loyalty. Something I owed somebody, a promise I made. Then, when you were gone, I was able to come to terms with it. Arielle—I want you to be my wife now."

Arielle touched her fingers to his cheek, torn with a wave of affection and pity. She didn't see him as a man, but as a little boy. A child, who could be pushed, bullied, led by a tyrannical old woman. Yet here was no Harry Fosbie. There was a man's need in his eyes.

"Once you asked me to be patient," she whispered. "Now, I'm asking you to do the same. It would have been different if you'd loved me in the beginning, but for now—please give me time."

"Matthew didn't lay hands on you—that way, did he?" Ramon's voice was harsh, with an ugly note. "If he did, by God—"

"You would do nothing," she said wearily. "The man's dead. But in answer to your question, Matthew did not molest me—in any way."

"I can't understand it! Why did he kidnap you? What did you do all that time?"

"The man was not in his right mind. I waited. He died and was buried. I came home."

Ramon rose to his feet, looking down at her. "I have to go back to the city tomorrow. I want you to remain close to the house, and take great care. I will ask Hawkins to watch over you."

"And who will give Hawkins his orders? With your mother ill, someone must be in charge."

He looked startled. "Why, as my wife, you will be mistress until she recovers, I suppose. Of course, you can depend upon Hawkins and Luisa. If there is a major decision, you can send a messenger for me."

Arielle nodded. "That's what I thought. I can assure you everything will be in good hands."

"I am sure of that." He stopped, his eyes darkening again. "Arielle?"

She looked at him steadily, and he lowered his gaze. "I will wait," he said. "But while I'm gone, try to think of me kindly." He brushed a kiss against her cheek, and she could see that he was trembling.

"I am very fond of you, Ramon. I will try."

She did not see him again before he rode away.

## Chapter 3

Arielle's first act after Ramon had gone was to go to her mother-in-law's sickroom. Luisa sat beside her mother, and Blanche hovered. The room was hot, firelight dancing off the red walls. Madam Villeré, face carefully made up, hair piled high, was propped against silken pillows. She looked so much herself that Arielle felt a pang of fear.

Then her eyes opened. She glared at Arielle with an expression of anger and frustration. Her mouth worked, but no words came.

Arielle went to the windows, drawing the drapes, letting the sun in. Then she opened the panes to the crisp autumn air. Luisa was on her feet, protesting. Arielle silenced her. "She needs the sun."

Then, going to the foot of the bed, she looked steadily at the older woman. "As Ramon's wife, I will take over your duties while you are ill. My ways

will not be your ways, but I'll do my best—with the well-being of everyone on the plantation in mind."

Madam Villeré made a gurgling sound, one pudgy hand flailing impotently at the air.

"You're upsetting her," Luisa said, alarmed. "Arielle, maybe you'd better go."

"I'm going. But I want to talk to you over breakfast. I will see you downstairs in a few minutes."

"I can't leave Mamal" Luisa was horrified. "I haven't left her side at all since she's been sick."

Arielle surveyed the girl, seeing her puffy eyes and sagging shoulders. "All the more reason for you to get away for a while. Blanche will be with her. We're going to have a talk, then you're to get some sleep."

She went down to the small breakfast room and ordered a meal for two. Luisa might join her, she might not. It was a good time to test her strength, if she were to do the things she intended here. She looked out of the window. Mindy and Thaddeus had already breakfasted. Now the old actor sat beneath a tree, acting out a story. Mindy and Coaley listened, their faces enthralled. Arielle yearned to join them, to be a child once more, without responsibilities. Then she reminded herself that she would soon be eighteen.

Luisa came, her movements guilty and furtive, as if she were doing something wrong. She slipped into a chair. "I don't like to leave Mama," she said, worried.

"Your mother looks quite well, in spite of her illness. But you look awful," Arielle said, bluntly. "Do you think it will help her if you make yourself sick? Here." Luisa looked startled at Arielle's statement, and accepted the cup that was thrust into her

hands. Arielle watched in satisfaction as she sipped at it, her color returning.

"You heard what I said to your mother. As Ramon's wife, I am mistress while she is too ill to attend to things. Do you have any argument with that?"

The plantation was in Madam Villeré's possession, held in trust for Ramon. No provision had been made for Luisa. "No," the girl said hopelessly, "I suppose not."

"Then we must begin to make some concrete plans. I understand you plan to marry Edward Alingham in December."

Luisa paled, looking down at her hands. "I promised Mama."

"Luisa, do you *want* to marry him?" The girl's stricken expression gave Arielle her answer.

"I don't think it would be wise to marry at this time," Arielle continued. "Your mother is ill. I would like you to take hold of the household, leaving me free for plantation affairs, if you will. Perhaps a postponement—" She stopped, aghast, as Luisa burst into tears. "I can manage, if you'd rather—"

"I'll do anything for you, Arielle," the girl sobbed. "Anything! Please, you can trust me! I didn't tell—"

"You saw who was with me in the garden the night I came home, didn't you? You knew I lied. And you didn't mention it. Why?"

Luisa wiped at her eyes and forced a watery smile. "I thought I might use it as blackmail, to try to get you to help me. But you already have."

She rose, going to kneel before Arielle's chair, taking her sister-in-law's hands in her own. "I know you don't think much of me," she said. "But I love my mother, and I love Ramon. I don't remember

Andre very well. I was too little when he ran away. But I know he hates them. And that he is associated with Jean Laffite. Don't let him use you to hurt them."

She got to her feet and ran from the room. Arielle sat, stunned. Could there be truth in what the girl said? Was Andre using her—to get even? He himself had admitted that his attack on her had been an act of revenge against his stepbrother.

*For the first time in his life, he'd said, he'll know what it is to be content with used goods.*

But the nights that followed! Those glorious nights of loving tenderness, laced with moments of passion like threads of gold! He loved her! There was no need to search behind his actions for reasons. It had not been a planned campaign to win her love—unless—

Unless he did it to win her loyalty; to prevent her from going to Governor Claiborne with her tale of being abducted; her knowledge of the fortifications at Grande Terre.

She had not agreed to lie for him! She'd made no promises. Yet she did, and he'd known she would. He'd been sure enough of her to go to Matthew's cabin and plant evidence that she'd been held prisoner there.

No! If she couldn't believe in Andre Villeré, she could believe in no one. It was not true! Not true! Not true!

She looked down at the napkin she held clenched in her hand, then placed it on the table, absently smoothing it, her brow furrowed.

She was nervous, that was all, or such wild ideas wouldn't enter her head. She must concentrate on other matters. There was much to do and little time in which to do it.

First, Hawkins. Shug had said the slaves were working at the far end of the property, clearing the brush along the bayou, now that the cane was laid by and it would soon be sugaring time. It would be a good time to have a talk with Trill.

She did not look forward to it, the memory of Junie still in her mind. But she must see the evidence of Hawkins' brutality for herself. Then she would return Trill to the quarters, call Hawkins to the study, and tell him he must mend his ways or leave Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Did she have that much authority, she wondered nervously, and if she used it, would Ramon stand by her decision?

She did not want Mindy along. If she went out through the back, she need not pass the trio occupied so happily beneath the tree. She went through the kitchen, finding it unoccupied. Cook had evidently stepped out for a moment. But a knife lay on the plank table. A cutting knife, with a sharp, shining blade.

Some instinct made Arielle pick it up. She slid the weapon into the ribbon that encircled her waist. Hawkins should be at the far end of the property overseeing the clearing. But if he came home, unexpectedly, she would have to meet him on his own ground.

As she walked toward the overseer's house, the air was heavy with the scent of late fall. Sumac blazed scarlet along the perimeter of the property. A bird flashed overhead, echoing its color. A heavy, wheatlike odor overrode the stagnant smells of the bayou country.

Her heart stopped as she saw the figure of a man before the small house. She half-turned, then looked again. The man was black. It wasn't Hawkins

then. But what in the name of God was he doing? Digging up April's lovely shrubs! She began to run.

"Stop that," she cried in indignation. "Stop!"

She reached the yard, recognizing the shirtless man as Big George. He turned slowly to face her, but not before she saw his back. His black satiny skin was welted, crisscrossed, still bleeding in places. The marks of a whip. A long gash marred his face from forehead to jawline. He looked strangely shrunken.

"Georgel" It was a cry of horror. Then, "George, who did this to you? Why? And why are you doing that?" She gestured toward April's ravaged plants.

Before he could answer, Hawkins rounded the house. He, too, was shirtless. He'd been washing up at the pump. His tousled hair was wet, his shoulders streaked with moisture. Drops of water clung to the matted hair on his chest, glistening. He mopped at his face with a towel as he leered at Arielle.

"I can answer them questions for you. Caught ol' George here, messin' around my proppity. Figgered if he liked this place so damn much, I'd set him somethin' to do."

"This is not your property, and neither is George. There will be no more whipping on this plantation!"

"Oh my, oh my!" he said in a mincing voice. "What the hell am I s'posed to do? Turn into a damn nigger lover? Not on your life, sweetheart! I get my orders from the old lady, not from you."

"I'm giving the orders now," Arielle said, trembling with rage. "You will obey them, or pack your things and leave. Do you understand?"

"Onliest thing I see is you're an interferin' little



bitch that ain't got enough man to keep her busy at home. Mebbe I oughtta give you a taste of what a real man's like!" He walked toward her, swaggering a little, an insinuating grin on his face.

"You're fired," she choked. "Get your things and go!" Dear God, she thought, he won't touch me! He wouldn't dare—

She stood her ground as the distance between them closed. Then she was pulled roughly into his arms, her face shoved against his damp matted chest. His hands fumbled at the back of her gown, tearing it.

Her reaction was instinctive, automatic. Her hand went to the knife at her waist.

*Go for the belly*, Gambi had said. Out—and up—

With an ear-splitting, maniacal roar, Hawkins backed from her, his hands clasped over his middle. Arielle looked down at the blood that stained her gown, a woman turned to stone.

He was coming toward her again. She couldn't move. Her feet seemed rooted to the spot. Then his awful bloody hands closed around her throat as he shook her like a rag doll. "I'm going to kill you," he snarled. "Kill you!"

Big George came at him from behind, his arms locking around Hawkins' bare chest. He brought up a knee and placed it in the middle of the overseer's back.

Hawkins released Arielle, his hands pawing helplessly at the air, and screamed. George did not release his pressure. Something snapped.

Arielle looked helplessly at the thing that lay at her feet, then raised her gaze to Big George. His eyes were red, crazed—a killer's eyes.

Arielle closed her own. He's going to put an

end to me, too, she thought. She had seen a slave kill a white man. She would not be allowed to live.

She could hear him breathing. Great shuddering gasps. Then the sound quieted. He was looking at her.

"Look lak Mistuh Hawkins done quit he job, Missie. Reckin' Trill can clean you up some, while I he'ps him move he stuff."

She stared numbly at the black man for a moment. Then his meaning penetrated her mind. She looked down at her bloodied gown, at her hand, red to the wrist, that still held a bloody knife. She dropped the thing, shuddering, then pulled herself together.

"Thank you, George. That's very kind of you. But please make certain that he—he won't show up again."

The black man smiled, his teeth flashing white in his dark face.

"Don' you fret youse'f, Missie. I growed up in these swamps. Knows jes' wheah this man's a-movin' to, I do. Jes' you trust in Big George."

He waited until she had gone into the house, then bent to his grisly task. He knew where swamp grasses shivered over muck that was dark and deep; where the secret he shared with his young mistress would be kept for eternity.

## Chapter 4

The battered Trill, her eyes worshipping and with a new hope in them, was unable to remove the dark blotches that stained Arielle's gown. Arielle managed to return to the house without being detected, went straight to her room, stripped off the dress and burned it. Then she summoned Shug and asked for hot water. She scrubbed for an hour, but imagined she could still feel the stickiness of Hawkins' blood on her throat and hands.

Had the blow she struck killed the overseer? Was his attack on her the last reflex of a dying man? Or would he have survived if Big George hadn't finished him off? She didn't know, and she never would. Between them, they had accomplished the deed.

She was sick over it, but she wasn't sorry. Not

after she saw what he'd done to Trill and the memories of Junie had come flooding back.

She couldn't afford to dwell on what had happened to Hawkins. There were other, more pressing problems. His death had left her in charge of more than a hundred slaves at sugaring time. Madam Villeré was ill. Luisa, Mindy, and Lindenwood would be of little help. If she sent for Ramon, he might look more closely into Hawkins' disappearance, and she and Big George could be found out. It would be better if time passed.

She put another stick of wood on the fire she'd set burning in her fireplace. There must be no smouldering remnant of the bloodstained gown. In the early morning, she would sift the ashes from any buttons or hooks that survived the burning and drop them into the bayou.

For a girl who'd never knowingly told a lie in her life, she'd come a long way. First the story about being held prisoner by Matt, and now this.

The thought of Andre caught at her, her conversation with Luisa replaying itself in her mind. She willed it away. She must not think of Andre either. There were things to do.

She went down to the study, and hunted out a few reports written in Hawkins' scrawling, illiterate hand. Painstakingly, she copied it, forging a resignation. By afternoon the rumor had spread among the slaves and reached the house. Hawkins had cleared out, bag and baggage. He was gone.

That night sounds of rejoicing came from the slave quarters. The blacks moved easily about, visiting in their hard-packed yards, laughing and talking as they had done when Davis was overseer. In the morning, they went off to work at dawn, led by Big

George. Arielle watched them from her window. She knew what she was going to do.

She went to the stables and had a horse saddled, then rode to the place where they were clearing. Finding George, she asked him to call them together. They stood before her, armed with hoes and scythes, eyes showing fear, though their faces were blank and still. She shivered, knowing they could turn on her as George had turned on Hawkins.

"I am going to try something," she said nervously. "Whether it works or not, is up to you. You know Hawkins, the overseer, is gone. I can find someone like him—"

A concerted groan came from the workers before her. She stopped, and then continued. "—Or I can ask George to take his place. You all know what needs to be done. It's almost time for the sugaring."

The hush that followed her unheard-of suggestion erupted in a tempest of good will. The slaves pressed toward her, grinning with happiness. "Yes, Ma'am, Missie. We wuk for George. We wuks good! Gawd bless you, Missie. Praise de Lawd!"

George himself stood stunned. Arielle turned to him. "You will occupy the overseer's house, of course."

His eyes filled with tears, the big hands hanging at his side clasping and unclasping. "Yes, Missie. An' Missie, I puts them bushes back." He turned to the black crew. "We gonna wuk good, us'd best git to it."

The laughing slaves turned to their work, scythes flashing, hoes chopping. Someone began a song, others joined, and they moved to its rhythm.

George looked at Arielle. "Dunno how to thank you, Missie."

"You've already thanked me."

She mounted her horse, and he caught at the stirrup. "That Trill," he began, looking at the ground, "She a nice little gal." He stopped, and Arielle smiled in amusement.

"She can keep house for you, George. But first she's got to let me know she wants to."

His face lit up like a lantern. "She wants to, Missie. Lawd, yes, she wants to."

Arielle rode slowly across the fields, worrying. Within a week or two, the sugaring process should begin. It was the focal point of the whole year, making the difference between profit and loss. Would the slaves' enthusiasm fade, with discipline relaxed and one of their own kind overseeing their labor? Was she putting too much trust in Big George?

She sighed. Only time would tell.

The rumor of Arielle's experiment spread far and fast. It reached the ears of the field hands at the Allingham plantation, carried to the house, and eventually to the Allinghams themselves. Edward and Elizabeth showed up at Villeré-in-the-Swamp within the week, ostensibly to inquire about Madam Villeré's health, but determined to discover if the rumor were true.

Learning it was, they were horrified. Edward, at his manliest, insisted on lending his services to locate an overseer. He was certain the slaves, led by George, would murder them all in their beds. Women, in a manless household—

Thaddeus Lindenwood uncoiled his length from his chair, towering over Allingham, his brow

dark with fury. "*I dare do all that may become a man,*" he thundered. "*Who dares do more, is none!*" After a pause, he added, "*Macbeth*, act one, scene seven." He sat down again.

Edward Allingham was reduced to bobbing and gulping. He and his sister soon left, more confused than when they had come. Luisa had informed Edward that their marriage was postponed indefinitely. And somehow, in complimenting Arielle on the whiteness of the household linens, Elizabeth had found herself trading her own laundress, mild-mannered Mary, for the surly Bathilde who now sat in the rear of the carriage, arms folded and face set.

A few miles down the road, Elizabeth felt faint. Reaching into her reticule for her smelling salts, she found a small and clammy frog.

When she revived, she and Edward were in agreement on several things. First, it had been one of the worst days of their lives. Second, young Mindy needed an authoritative hand. For that matter, her sister, Arielle, did, too.

Third, it was their duty to inform Ramon Marquez, as quickly as possible, of the changes that were taking place at Villeré-in-the-Swamp.

They rode in silence for a while. Elizabeth helped herself from the basket of little cakes she'd brought for Madam Villeré and neglected to leave. Munching on them, her dim mind began to go over the situation. She'd never forgiven Arielle for turning up alive. And she felt the girl was at the bottom of the postponement of Luisa's marriage to Edward.

"Maybe," she said slowly, "we ought to let it be. Let her make a botch of things. Then Ramon will see the trouble she's caused."

Edward looked at her with admiring eyes. "Good thinking, old girl!"

She smiled, smugly, and fished out another cake.

The hopes of the Allinghams were not realized. The sugaring-off went well. For a time Arielle rode to the fields and to the sugar mill, thinking to keep an eye on the progress, but her supervision wasn't needed. The cane was cut, crushed, the syrup boiled down. The weather held. The blacks sang at their work. And once again the house was redolent of dark, sweet molasses and baking gingerbread.

When the task was completed, Arielle checked the results against previous years. Villeré-in-the-Swamp had never produced a crop of such quantity and quality. Her trust in Big George had paid off.

When the sugar mill was cleaned and closed for the year, she rewarded the slaves for their efforts, contributing from the household for a night of feasting and celebration. She, Mindy, and Lindenwood joined in until the early hours. Big George and Trill "jumped the broom," becoming man and wife.

There was only one frightening note. Someone mentioned Hawkins, and old Teeny said clearly, "He daid."

Arielle froze at her words, then the old woman went on. "Berried a quart of ashes on ol' Ned's grave," she said. "S'posed to kill him off in nine days, or nine months. Tuk nine months to the day. He daid, all right."

Arielle shivered at the finality in the old woman's voice. Could there be anything to her eerie magic? If so, there were three murderers present tonight. Big George, old Teeny—and herself.

For a while, it cast a pall upon Arielle's eve-



ning. Then the soft singing of hymns lulled her. Mindy yawned against her shoulder, and the white folks returned to the big house and to bed, leaving the black ones to their joy.

Ramon returned at the end of the second week in December. He was overjoyed to find his mother well enough to be carried to the parlor, where she sat in state, a heavy shawl draped over her useless legs. She still couldn't speak clearly, but her improvement was apparent. He didn't see her bitter look as he put an affectionate arm about his wife's waist, the other about Luisa.

"I'm glad to be home with all my sweethearts," he said, happily.

His surprise was evident when Arielle led him into the study and showed him the reports on the sugar crop. He pursed his lips and whistled. "I must give Hawkins a raise for this."

She braced herself, hands on the desk. "Hawkins isn't responsible. He isn't here." He looked bewildered, and she gave him the forged note. He studied it, looking at the date.

"Then you found a new overseer? Arielle, I told you that if there were problems—"

"I didn't have time to contact you," she said coolly. "And I do have an overseer. Big George."

Ramon looked stunned. "A black man? Good God, Arielle! I never heard of such a thing! It won't work."

"It did."

He stared at her. "I suppose you're right," he said uneasily, "but it can't continue. I will find someone the minute I get back to New Orleans. In the meantime—"

Her eyes flashed defiance. "Either I am the mistress here while your mother is ill—or I am not.

If I am, things will go on as they are. If you get a new overseer, you will have to find a new wife! I would imagine Elizabeth is still willing."

He stood stunned for a moment, then burst into laughter. It lit up his face, making him look boyish and happy. He put his arms around her, drawing her close, and she submitted, feeling a wave of affection.

"This is a side of you I've never seen," he whispered against her hair. "My sweet, submissive little girl, standing up for herself. You're lovely when you're angry. For a moment there, you reminded me of Mamacital!"

She stiffened in his arms and pulled free. He looked at her, the light dying slowly in his eyes. "What we talked about before I left," he said soberly, "you've thought it over?"

"I still can't be your wife, if that's what you mean. Not yet."

"I can wait. Arielle, have you thought about Christmas yet? Purchases must be made. Gifts for the slaves."

"I hadn't," she admitted, guiltily. Sugar had occupied her mind, totally and completely.

"Then you must go to New Orleans with me. There's not much time left. We can stay in a hotel—" He paused, and Arielle could read his thoughts. The two of them alone. He might be able to break down her barriers. A honeymoon—

"Perhaps Luisa can go, too," she said stiffly.

"Luisa should remain with Mamacita."

She lifted her chin. "Then Mindy and Thaddeus. They can help me with my selections."

He sighed. He had been around his mother long enough to know when it was useless to argue with a woman.

The remainder of the day passed pleasantly.

Ramon took the news of the postponement of Luisa's marriage well. He agreed that it was best to wait until his mother's health improved. He joked with Lindenwood and teased Mindy until she blushed with pleasure. Small Coaley followed him about in adoration.

She should be able to love him, Arielle thought. He was good. He was kind and gentle. If only it were not for Andre.

It was late in the afternoon before they escaped from the house. They walked, companionably, Ramon filling her in on the news from New Orleans.

Governor Claiborne had offered five hundred dollars reward for the capture of Laffite; for his delivery to the sheriff of New Orleans, or to any sheriff in the state of Louisiana. Copies of the proclamation had been nailed to every lamppost. Laffite himself, had walked into town, bold as brass, and removed the proclamation. He replaced it with one offering a fifteen hundred dollar reward to anyone who would capture Governor William C. C. Claiborne and deliver him to Jean Laffite at Grande Terre.

Everyone was laughing at his daring stunt—except the governor.

Arielle was silent, seeing the slim dark figure of Laffite in her mind. It was something he would do. A ridiculous, gallant gesture.

"It's a wonder he wasn't caught."

"He will be."

"Ramon, do you believe Laffite is really treating with the British?"

Ramon Marquez, whose career was dedicated to creating a rift between Governor Claiborne and Jean Laffite, avoided her open gaze. "It is certain that he is."

"But the English attacked Laffite at Grand Isle!"

His body jerked. "How could you know that?"

Dear God, she must be more careful! "Someone told me," she stammered. "Perhaps it was Edward."

"A ruse to throw us off our guard. If the British join with Laffite, Claiborne knows New Orleans hasn't a prayer. His only hope is to move in and capture Laffite. Without a leader the pirates may scatter to the winds. But Laffite has friends in the city. Sentiment runs high in his favor. Claiborne is indecisive—for which I can't blame him. Before I left, he received a message from General Flournoy, saying he could only offer him seven hundred men to defend New Orleans against the British."

His words were doleful, but a rather pleased smile hovered about his lips. Arielle looked at him curiously, and he caught himself.

"But there is some good news. General Andrew Jackson has put down the Indians that have been rampaging near Mobile. There is hope that he will be here in time to help us."

"New Orleans is beautiful," Arielle said wistfully. "I would hate to see it become a battleground."

"So would I," Ramon said in an odd voice. "So would I."

He changed the subject. They were passing the overseer's house. The yard was neat and clean, the bushes replanted. It looked like a home, loved and lived in.

"I can't get used to the idea of a black living there," he said thoughtfully. "And I can't believe Hawkins would just take off like that. Did you, actually see the man, Arielle? Did you talk to him?"

She shut her eyes, remembering the blood that spurted on her gown, feeling the hands that encircled her throat, hearing the snapping sound as Big George bent the man backward over his knee.

"Arielle!"

She came back to the present, fighting off a wave of dizziness. Ramon was looking at her with concern—and suspicion.

"There's something you haven't told me," he said quietly.

"I told him to go. He—he put his dirty hands on me, and I told him to go!"

"Good God! To think he dared—! I'm going to find the man! He'll answer to me."

"He's gone. He won't be back."

"But you can't be sure."

"I am. Now, let's go back to the house."

Ramon walked beside his wife, thinking how amazing she was.

She had changed after her abduction by old Matt; grown up, become immensely desirable. He was afraid to leave her here, yet would she be safer in the city? He was gone so much on the work for Claiborne—and the secret missions of his own. When war came, New Orleans would be ravaged. Under the promised protection of the British, Villeré-in-the-Swamp would not be molested.

And Mamacita was here. As helpless as she was, he felt she could be counted on, if need be. She had always been there.

He put his arm around his wife. "We will leave for New Orleans in the morning," he said. "There will be excess profits on the sugar crop. You may spend them as you please."

That night he went into her room, looking down at her moonlit face. His body throbbed with sup-

pressed need. Perhaps if he went to her now, took her by surprise—

It wouldn't be wise. It was his own rejection of her, the long period of neglect, that stood between them. He had asked her to wait. Now she was doing the same to him, as a salve to her pride. He couldn't blame her, but he needed her. Ah *Dios*, how he needed her.

She smiled in her sleep and moaned, twisting a little. Unable to trust himself, he beat a hasty retreat.

He couldn't know that she was dreaming of another man. That in her sleep, she pressed close against the body of his stepbrother, Andre Villeré.

## Chapter 5

Andre Villeré was awake, but he was sharing Arielle's dream. He stood on the small arched bridge that led from his property to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. His love was so near, and yet so far away. For all he knew, she might be sleeping in her husband's arms. The thought weighed on him like a sickness.

If only she knew he was here. If he could just summon her with his mind! He closed his eyes, imagining her running across the fields toward him, her dark hair flying—

But it was no use. She could not know he was here. And it was just as well, for sleeping in his bed was another woman. He had been forced by Laffite to bring Tauna along on a mission.

The island of Grande Terre was replete with gems, silks, satins, velvet, gold, and rum. But the food supplies, taken from captured ships, were often

rancid and soaked with salt water. Fish and game, of course, were to be had in plenty, but other staples were needed. Fresh flour. Sugar. Salt. With Claiborne as angry as he was, it was unwise for the Baratarians to appear in town.

Laffite worked out a plan. Andre would deliver a load of flints to be concealed at his home. He would take Tauna with him. They would go to New Orleans, posing as man and wife; Andre's silky, new-grown beard was sufficient disguise for the casual eye. They were to purchase necessary supplies and return.

There had been much argument about the plan. Pierre Laffite was inclined to ignore the danger from Claiborne. After all, he was a merchant, was he not? He owned a blacksmith shop, and there was their outlet for smuggled goods.

Laffite, having the stronger will of the two, talked Pierre down.

Andre himself, finally gave in; not because of the need for supplies, but because he knew the soon-to-be defenders of the New Orleans area were short of flints. When the time came, he would have a store at hand.

Now he was eager to get the whole thing over with; to return Tauna to Grande Terre. Her attitude on the whole journey had been one of blatant invitation, a brushing of breasts and thighs, provocative movements.

He scowled. Perhaps he was a fool, not taking advantage of what was offered. But Arielle filled his mind. He'd looked forward to being near her, built fantasies of a chance meeting. That was all they were, he thought glumly. Fantasies. And being here, so close to her, hurt too much. He and Tauna would leave for New Orleans in the morning.



They left several hours before the small cavalcade moved out from Villeré-in-the-Swamp. It was a pleasant journey for Arielle. Ramon was at his gallant best, keeping Mindy in a spate of giggles, talking knowledgeably with Thaddeus Lindenwood. Away from his mother, he was truly a charming man.

Another carriage followed behind, driven by one of the slaves. It would be used to transport the purchases made in New Orleans. Now it held a basket of food, put up by Shug who had bullied the cook unmercifully. Crusty bread, cheese, gingerbread, dried fruits. And several bottles of wine poked from the basket, taking chill from the crisp air.

Finding a small clearing, they stopped to eat. Lindenwood nodded beneath a tree, and Mindy explored, pink-cheeked with excitement. Ramon lay back with his head in Arielle's lap. She stroked his hair. It feels like we're a family, she thought. It might eventually become true.

When they left the spot, Ramon said, "I think this has been one of the happiest days of my life." Arielle felt a lump in her throat at the wistful note in his voice.

They arrived in the city, already in gala preparation for the holiday season, despite the threat of war. The hotel suite they had reserved consisted of two rooms, a double bed in one, a single in the other. Mindy and Arielle would occupy the larger one, Lindenwood the smaller. Ramon would return to his bachelor quarters.

At his suggestion, dinner was brought up for Mindy and the old actor. He would take Arielle out to dine.

Arielle's pulse raced with excitement as she dressed for the occasion. She hadn't realized how

lonely for social contact she'd been of late. She pulled on her blue gown and fastened her sapphire pendant about her throat, looking at the flushed face, the bright eyes, the figure in the mirror.

No wonder men didn't understand women, she thought wryly. Women couldn't even understand themselves. In these last months she had looked on horror. She had been kidnapped. She had stabbed a man—perhaps been responsible for his death. She had lain in the arms of a man she wasn't wedded to—and now, she was thrilling with pleasure at the thought of dressing up, dining in a big hotel with a husband she did not love.

Ramon's eyes told her how she looked. He proffered his arm, and they descended the stairs, entering a dining room of crimson and gold. Chandeliers overhead dripped pendants of crystal that sparked with blue fire from the candlelight. Women in beautiful gowns, men in fine dress suits sat at linen covered tables, or moved between them.

Ramon seated her, and she looked at him in appreciation. He was easily the handsomest man in the room.

He ordered for them both, then pointed out the celebrities about them. There was the banker Sauvignet. And over there, with the woman in mauve velvet, the lawyer John Randolph Grymes. A strange fellow, Grymes. A close friend of Laffite. It was he who had gotten him off with a paltry fine after he was jailed last year. The man just entering was Edward Livingston, a brother of Robert Livingston, who had aided in drafting the Declaration of Independence. He was a partner of Grymes. Both were intimates of Governor Claiborne.

There was J. H. Holland, Keeper of the Prison at the Cabildo. The man he indicated stopped by

their table, and was presented to Arielle. He eyed her with obvious admiration.

"I have been home for several days," Ramon said. "I suppose it is too much to hope that any of the Laffites enjoy your hospitality?"

"At the present, the prison houses only a couple of hot-tempered Cajuns and one drunken Indian, I'm sorry to say."

"Perhaps you'll have better luck in the new year."

With a bow to Arielle, the jailer moved on. Arielle was startled to see a familiar face across the room. "There's Louis Daumont!" She waved a hand and the young lieutenant came toward them.

"Madam Marquez! So good to see you once more."

"Won't you join us?" Arielle asked. She gestured toward a chair, and Daumont accepted her invitation as Ramon groaned inwardly.

"Are you here alone?" the newcomer blurted. "Or perhaps, is Miss Luisa—?"

Arielle explained that Luisa had remained behind. She felt sorry for the boy. He was as transparent as glass, his feelings for her sister-in-law written on his face. Even his questions gave him away. Was Miss Luisa well. Had she plans for coming to New Orleans at any time in the near future? He wondered if she remembered meeting him at the governor's ball.

"She speaks of you quite often," Arielle said. His eyes shone with delight, and Ramon interrupted rudely.

"Perhaps we should tell him Luisa is soon to be married, Arielle."

"Ramon," Arielle said quickly, "I don't think—"

But he was on his feet, drawing her to her own. "I intend to dance with my wife, Daumont, if you will excuse us."

When they returned, Daumont was gone. Arielle's face flamed with anger. "Ramon, how could you! The man's in love with Luisa! Any fool can see it! And Luisa isn't going to marry Edward soon, or ever, if she could help it!"

"It is my mother's wish," Ramon said stiffly. "We can't ignore her wishes just because she is sick and helpless."

"What about Luisa's wishes?" Arielle shot back. "She's young, with a whole life ahead of her. Do you think she should be sacrificed to the whims of a—*a*—a cruel, selfish old woman?"

"Arielle!" He reached across the table and gripped her wrist, hurting her. "I will not allow you to speak of my mother in that way! Not ever again, do you understand?" He leaned back, breathing heavily, his face white as he fought to control his anger.

"I'm sorry," he said weakly. "I didn't mean to sound so—irritable. Perhaps Luisa and Edward will marry. Perhaps not. But Daumont is not the man for her, and I do not want his attentions encouraged."

"I gather that is an order?"

"A request, my love." He tried to smile. "Here is our dinner. Can't we forget about Luisa and Daumont, and enjoy our meal?"

Arielle was silent as the waiter served them, lifting silver covers from delectable dishes. The pleasure had gone out of the evening. She wished only to return to her room.

Later, after he had left her at her door, Ramon cursed himself for ruining the evening. He needn't

have given Daumont the news of Luisa's engagement so bluntly. He could have hunted him up tomorrow, and dropped a hint then, away from Arielle's disapproving eyes.

Taking over as mistress of the plantation had done something to Arielle. She seemed to have developed a strong-willed, stubborn streak. Sometimes he felt she had an inner core of iron.

Pray God that Mamacita would return to good health, and soon. He needed her help. And perhaps his wife would once more become the sweet, docile child he'd married.

Arielle was far from docile as she removed her gown. Taking off the pendant, she tossed it carelessly to the top of a bureau. Then, still simmering with anger, she pulled on her nightdress and climbed in beside Mindy. Ramon's announcement to Louis Daumont had been uncalled for, a deliberate act of cruelty. She had seen another side of him tonight. True, he was kind, loving, generous. But so was Madam Villeré when she wasn't crossed. He was his mother's son!

No, she thought wearily, he wasn't. She'd made him into an ogre because she was angry. He was weak. That was the word. And because he was weak, he'd become an extension of his mother's will. In other circumstances, he might have been a fine man.

She recalled Andre's words. *Perhaps it would be better to say I do not respect him.*

This afternoon when they'd stopped to eat, and he had lain with his head in her lap; she'd stroked his hair, daring to hope they might have some kind of life together.

Could she live with a man she didn't respect?

After a night of fitful sleep, she rose to Mindy's excited coaxing. Ramon was waiting downstairs. Thaddeus preferred to remain at the hotel, but Ramon had said that if Arielle approved she could accompany them on the shopping trip.

Arielle hugged her small sister. Approve? She certainly did!

It was a pleasant day. First they went to the factor, where they were treated like royalty. Then to an enormous warehouse where purchases were made for the slaves at Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Bolts of material, shoes, sticks of striped peppermint candy, tobacco.

"I'm doubling their gifts this year," Arielle told Ramon. He looked dubious, and she said, "They earned the profits you said I could spend."

He shrugged, and let her have her way.

The bulk shopping done, they wandered among the shops on Royal Street. The colorful, laughing people surrounding them were bubbling with holiday spirit. Vendors pushed carts of hot roasted peanuts, kept warm by the use of small charcoal braziers. Others sold pralines, smoked fish, or sweet, hot candied yams.

"You will make yourself sick, Mindy," Arielle scolded. But Ramon only laughed, indulging the child's every request. A bit of each treat was wrapped, carefully, to take home to Coaley. Mindy was in seventh heaven when Ramon suggested they leave Arielle, who was in a quandary over a gift for Lindenwood, to shop alone for a while. He needed her aid in buying something very special.

Arielle knew it was her own Christmas present, but pretended innocence as they went off together, Mindy in a fit of giggles.

Arielle made her purchase and stepped out on the banquette. After the stifling atmosphere of Villeré-in-the-Swamp, it was good to be lost among a crowd of smiling strangers. She walked casually along, enjoying the sights and smells of New Orleans at holiday season, making up stories about the people she saw.

That small, plump American woman, loaded with parcels, was a grandmother. She was certain her burden consisted of things for children. She watched her, wistfully, envying her. And that young man, with his girl, was positively glowing. He carried nothing visible, but she'd guess that in his pocket, he carried a ring.

The bearded man in the alleyway, holding the bridle of one of his team, was a farmer in from the country. His cart was piled high with staples. His stance was impatient. He was likely waiting for his wife—

The man's eyes caught hers and rounded in surprise. Dear God! Andre!

She stood paralyzed for a moment, then, with a small indrawn breath, moved to meet him. His hands went out to catch her own. "Arielle," he said in an odd, broken voice. "I can't believe it's you! I stood on the bridge last night, wishing you'd come—and now—"

"I'm here," she said, trembling.

"I've been going crazy, wondering if—you were all right—if anything came of those nights in the swamp."

Arielle thought of Luisa's words. *Don't let Andre use you to hurt them.* Her nagging doubts returned. Nothing would hurt Ramon more than having his wife returned to him in a pregnant condition.

"No. Are you disappointed?" She looked at him levelly.

"To be honest, I suppose I am in a way. Forgive me, sweetheart. It seemed that there should be a result of something so wonderful."

She felt the old melting sensation and swayed toward him. He put out one hand to steady her, and looked up and down the narrow lane. "We'll have to go someplace to talk," he said. "We can't risk being seen. There's a back room at Laffite's shop we can use."

She looked at him, open-mouthed. He seemed almost furtive in his actions.

"If you're afraid my being with you will attract attention, I will go," she said, witheringly. "I'm to meet Mindy and Ramon soon anyway."

"It isn't that," he said, catching at her hand. "God, no! I don't want you to get the wrong idea—"

As he spoke, a woman burst from the side door of a shop. She was dressed in a farm woman's clothes, but her bonnet had fallen back to reveal a torrent of dark hair and a beautiful face.

Tauna!

She heaved her parcels into the wagon, apparently ignorant of Arielle's presence. In truth, she had stood watching them, formulating her campaign. Jean Laffite might have noticed her had Arielle not distracted him. And now she sensed the girl was the reason for Andre's lack of ardor.

If so, she would put an end to their relationship.

"Andre," she cried, climbing to the seat of the vehicle. "Come! Come, my husband! Wait till you see what I buy! Now, all is ready to go home and make the love—"

Arielle and Andre stood transfixed for a mo-



ment, then Arielle turned and ran from the lane. She heard Andre's voice calling after her, but she did not slow her steps until she reached the hotel.

Mindy and Ramon found her there after returning to the appointed spot and discovering she had gone. She pleaded a headache, and her pallor bore her out. They agreed to make a few final purchases for her, and, after her assurances that she would be all right, set out together.

Arielle waited until they were out of sight. Then she went straight to the Cabildo and requested an audience with Governor Claiborne.

## Chapter 6

Claiborne was delighted to see her. He'd been shattered at the news of her disappearance, delighted when he heard she'd turned up alive and well. He'd only been sorry the slave, Matthew, who kidnapped her, was dead. He'd have hunted him down and sentenced him to hang. This girl was like a daughter to him. He'd given her hand at her wedding, hadn't he?

He came around the desk to meet her, clasping her hands in his. They were cold, and her face was like stone. Hastily, he drew out a chair for her. Surely, she wasn't going to swoon! He had a normal man's healthy fear of a woman's frailties. Brandy! That was the thing!

He sloshed some into a glass and gave it to her. She sipped at it, her color returning to his great relief.

"What is it, my dear? Is something wrong? If that young rascal, Ramon—"

"I'm going to tell you something Ramon doesn't know," she said dully. "I don't want him to know. Because I lied to him—about being abducted."

Her words jolted him. Surely she hadn't gone off with another man! The lady wasn't the type. If she did, he didn't want to hear the details. He held up a restraining hand. "My dear—"

"I was kidnapped by Laffite's men," she said.

"Good God!" He drew a chair in front of her and sat down, taking hold of her hands. "Tell me."

She didn't mention going to Andre's house. She had gone out for a breath of air, and had been kidnapped. She was held prisoner on Grande Terre, then someone—she named no names—had brought her home.

"In the name of God, why! Why would they take you? Why would they bring you back? If there had been a ransom note—any attempt at blackmail!" He looked at her with dawning horror. "They didn't—they didn't dare—"

"I wasn't harmed."

That was a lie. She had been harmed. She'd suffered a hurt she would carry all her life. Andre—Andre—

She stiffened her shoulders and went on. "As you say, the whole affair doesn't make sense. The important thing is that I can give you details you may want about Grande Terre. The number of guns, their emplacement. An approximate number of vessels and men. A description of the terrain—"

She began talking, spilling facts and figures. Governor Claiborne reached for a pen and paper, scribbling rapidly to keep up with her spate of words.

"Wonderful," he breathed when she had finished. "Wonderfull! You are a very observant young lady. You deserve a commendation."

"I want my name kept out of it. As I told you, I lied to my husband."

Governor Claiborne's brow furrowed. "That is something else I do not understand. May I ask why?"

This time she had anticipated his question. Turning guileless blue eyes on him, she said, "Ramon is very hot-tempered, Sir. He already has reason to hate Laffite. If he had known, he would have behaved rashly. I did not want my husband killed on my account. Any attack on Laffite or Grande Terre should be handled by the proper authorities."

"We will stamp them out like the snakes they are! You are a brave girl." The governor showed her to the door, still gallantly expressing his thanks for her information.

Arielle left the Cabildo, stumbling a little. Her anger had given way. Now she only felt a vast, consuming grief. She had loved Andre Villeré, truly, with all her heart. He'd brought her back to Villeré-in-the-Swamp and left her there. But she'd still had her dreams and a vague hope that someday he might come for her. Her dreams had died today, on a New Orleans street, when he had been caught in a lie. He had married Tauna.

That night, she tossed and turned, the enormity of what she'd done coming home to her. When she closed her eyes, she could see Jean Laffite's face, alight with his rare smile. She could hear Mrs. Grogan's voice, coarse but kind. "Do you think you should have done that, dearie?"

She shuddered. There were the others. Nez

Coupé; his son Louis; his wife and multitude of children. What would happen to them if Grande Terre were attacked?

But then, what would happen to New Orleans if Laffite joined with the British as was rumored? Her mother was dead because of Laffite's privateers. And she had seen him shoot down a young man, coldly, without emotion.

They were the lawless ones, not she! She had done only what she should have done in going to Claiborne. She had only made one mistake. She'd been unable to force herself to incriminate Andre Villeré.

"Arielle?" Mindy's voice held a plaintive note that brought her to attention. "Arielle, my stomach hurts. I think I'm going to be sick."

She was. Overly excited, stuffed on an assortment of rich and varied foods, her big day in the city had caught up with her. Arielle spent the rest of the night holding the small, retching body, applying cold cloths to the little girl's face and throat. She was sorry for Mindy, but almost glad for the chance to keep busy at an urgent task—to keep from thinking.

Leaving Mindy behind, asleep at last, Arielle finished her shopping the next morning. She purchased a gypsy shawl and gloves to match for Mindy, a warm stocking cap for Coaley. For Luisa and her mother, she bought boxes of scented powder. She selected an intricately carved pipe and a jar of rum-flavored tobacco for Ramon, adding a pair of slippers from another shop. It seemed a wifely gift.

In yet another store, she found a doll for Mindy. It would never know the love her old doll did,

but it would be welcomed. For Coaley, a bag of marbles like multicolored bubbles and a jackknife.

Then it was time to go home.

Ramon went with them. Governor Claiborne had called him into his office and, smiling expansively, told him to take some time off to be with his little wife. "I don't know what's got into him," Ramon worried. "It isn't like him, with things as tense as they are."

Arielle said nothing. But she knew.

When they reached Villeré-in-the-Swamp, only several days remained before Christmas. The Yule log was brought in. Shug helped Arielle get the house in order for drop-in guests. At last, the house shining, Arielle and Mindy turned to setting up the crèche.

Ramon helped them. "I always wanted to do this, but Mamacita never allowed it when I was a boy. She was certain I would be clumsy and spoil it—"

He stopped. He had stepped on a tiny carved lamb, grinding it beneath his boots. "I think I see why," he said, ruefully. He looked so comically guilty that Mindy went into a fit of giggles.

The project continued with fun and laughter. As the hour grew late, Shug brought steaming cups of hot buttered rum and a treat of milk and cookies for Mindy. They sat by the fire, warmth spreading through them, then returned merrily to their work.

Finally sending Mindy along to bed, Arielle and Ramon arranged presents at the foot of the crèche. They stood back and looked at their handiwork. In the manger a doll-sized infant slept, his mother looking down in adoration. Ramon's arm went around Arielle, and she let her head rest on his

shoulder. The house smelled of bayberry, wood-smoke, and spices. It had the scent of home.

Ramon turned Arielle toward the stairs and walked beside her, arm encircling her, as she ascended. They entered the sitting room and went into Arielle's bedchamber where a fire glowed on the hearth and a single candle burned.

Arielle lifted her face and he kissed her gently. She did not attempt to pull away.

"Arielle?" he said in a choked voice. It was a question. The answer was in her eyes. She was willing! Ah *Dios*, she was willing! Suppressing his desire, he forced himself to go slowly. With trembling hands, he unfastened the buttons of her gown, touching his lips to her smooth shoulders.

At last, he carried her to the marriage bed and took her as his wife.

Afterward, he was conscious of a vague disappointment. She had been dutiful, sweet, compliant. He knew that he had struck no answering fires within her. There had been no frantic writhing to get closer, no pleading words, no small hands clawing at his shoulders, sharing his need. It was not as it had been with Cleone.

He had to remember this girl was different, taught restraints from birth. The other thing, the realization of her own passions, would come in time. And while their coming together hadn't been a soul-shaking experience, it was satisfying. It was good to lie beside her, holding her warm body in his arms.

I've done it, Arielle thought fiercely to herself. I've become the wife I promised I would be. And I will be a good wife!

She would make a real home for Mindy. She

would endure Ramon's caresses, and in time she would learn to enjoy them. She would forget the man whose name was not mentioned in this house—just as he had forgotten her.



## Chapter 7

Christmas was a festive day. Plank tables were set up outside the slave quarters, and Arielle provided a day-long feast. There were platters of sliced ham, golden heaps of cornbread, pit-cooked beans, seasoned with the small red Louisiana peppers. Pitchers of milk and buttermilk. Black molasses, and sugared gingerbread.

Mindy and Coaley nearly burst with excitement. They took their gifts and disappeared. Ramon unwrapped Arielle's presents to him, showing his pleasure. Then he presented his gift, a string of perfectly matched pearls. The pearls had been taken from oysters from the Louisiana coast. He had selected them himself and had the necklace made. He'd wanted no smuggled goods for his wife.

Arielle's eyes filled with tears as he fastened them about her throat. She would have embraced

him, but Luisa appeared. Madam Villeré wished to be brought downstairs.

Ramon and the muscular Shug managed to bring her down. Blanche walked behind them, carrying two canes. The invalid gestured that she wished to be released. Taking the canes, she managed a few halting steps. Then, looking at her son, she clearly enunciated his name.

Ramon and Luisa were ecstatic. But Arielle was silent and thoughtful. The woman had given her a baleful, triumphant glance that said Arielle's days as mistress of Villeré-in-the-Swamp were numbered. If nothing else, she would recover through spite.

The day went well. The Villeré relatives stopped by. A number of Marquez cousins. The Allinghams. Then Madam Villeré was carried to her room, and Arielle, exhausted, went to her own chamber—to lie beside Ramon.

The year melted into a new one. Still Ramon lingered, content with his wife and his plantation. He was out early each morning, Coaley tagging at his heels, watching as the dark land was laid out in furrows, the seed cane laid down. Dubious at first, he became more convinced every day that Arielle's action in putting Big George in charge was an inspired one. The slaves sang as they worked, the winter's ground transformed miraculously.

"I'm afraid Mamacita won't like it though."

Arielle had much the same concern. The old woman was improving every day. Sometime in the future, she might want to reestablish her authority.

"I want George to stay in his position. You will stand by me on that, won't you?"

"Of course." But he didn't meet her eyes.

It was nearing the end of January when young Louis Daumont arrived. He bore a message from

Claiborne. The governor was sorry, but he must ask Ramon to return.

Luisa's eyes had lit up at the young lieutenant's appearance. Her expression changed to bewilderment, then the glow died out as Louis treated her with a cold formality. She soon excused herself and fled to her mother's room.

Louis Daumont delivered what news he had. General Jackson hadn't been heard from yet. No one knew if he would be sent to New Orleans or ordered north. Claiborne was like a bear with a sore paw. Handbills had appeared, announcing another auction at The Temple. They were signed by Jean Laffite. Claiborne, short-handed, sought aid from the United States Collector of Customs. The Collector sent in twelve men, under a man named Stout, with orders to prevent the auction.

Now Stout was dead, his men prisoners.

Claiborne, angrier than ever, organized some militia. They vanished into the swamps. Laffite captured them and sent them back with expensive gifts. They were going about praising the man. A French newspaper was openly making fun of Claiborne, and he was raging. He'd called a Grand Jury. Charges were placed against both Laffites, Beluchi, and Dominique You. They were accused of piracy, a crime punishable by death.

Arielle, shaken by the conversation, left the room and went upstairs to pack Ramon's things. In a few minutes, he left Daumont and came to join her. Together they bundled the things he wished to take with him. Then he put his arms around her, laying his cheek against her hair.

"I don't want to go. You know that."

"Yes," she said in a stifled voice.

"I will be back soon. Is there anything you want from New Orleans?"

"I'd like you to do something for me. Tell Lieutenant Daumont that Luisa doesn't wish to marry Edward Allingham. That though they still have an understanding, the wedding is postponed indefinitely."

"That affair is ended. There is no point in giving him hope, beginning it all over again."

"Ramon!" Her voice was taut with anger. He sighed, looking away from her.

"Very well. I will think about it."

He had no intention of speaking to Daumont about Luisa. Arielle knew it as he left her and went down the stairs. In spite of their new relationship, his mother was gradually regaining her hold.

That night, she slept better than she had for some time. With Ramon away, she felt strangely at peace. Perhaps it was because she had no need to pretend emotions she didn't feel.

Ramon, on the other hand, slept fitfully. Alone in his bachelor quarters, he yearned for his wife.

So much did he miss her that, as the months passed, he returned home often. At each visit he found his mother's condition improved. She still could not walk without aid; her voice was slurred at times, but she was rapidly regaining her strength. He was surprised that she made no comment about Hawkins' replacement.

What he didn't know was that she and Arielle had already had a confrontation. The old woman had demanded that Hawkins be found and returned, or that another white overseer be hired.

Arielle had faced her, face hard, eyes blazing. George was handling his job properly. He would

stay. "There will be no more brutality on this plantation!" she had finished.

"Very well." Madam Villeré shrugged, and there was an end to it. But Arielle felt a cold chill. Her mother-in-law was only biding her time.

Each time Ramon came, he brought news of New Orleans and the world outside Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Pierre Laffite had come strolling into town. It was thought to be an act of defiance against Claiborne's Grand Jury. He was arrested near the St. Louis Cathedral, and was now held in chains in the Cabildo.

"Pierre Laffite isn't the major criminal," Arielle blurted. "It is his brother who leads that crew of ruffians! They have the wrong man!"

Ramon looked at her curiously. "It is surprising what you have learned, isolated here. And, yes, you are quite correct in what you say. But it is a beginning. This time, bail has been denied. Jean Laffite will not be content to let his brother rot in chains. Pierre Laffite will be used as bait."

"In chains! Like an animal!"

Ramon nodded, a pleased expression on his face. "Exactly. And he will remain there, until he is tried—and hung."

Arielle was distracted during the remainder of her husband's visit. She walked with him, talked with him, mechanically allowed him to make love to her. Her mind was on her conversation with Claiborne, and its ugly results. Pierre Laffite, the round, rather cross-eyed little man, had not been her quarry. He didn't even look like a brigand, but more like a middle-aged shopkeeper. She could not see him boarding a ship, sword slashing. She could not see him hurting anyone.

As March merged into April, Ramon's visits be-

gan to lessen. The news of the war seemed to grow worse each day. In New Orleans the citizens were edgy. It took a long time for letters and dispatches to arrive from the East Coast. Word from New York and Washington came by way of couriers on horseback, or with riverboats down the Mississippi. The process took weeks and months. New Orleans might be the last to know the country had fallen. Its people waited nervously.

In the meantime, spring came to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. Crepe myrtle and jasmine bloomed near the house, blanketing the air with scent. At a distance, there were stretches of wild mallow in white bloom, or in changing shades of rose and carmine. Huge irises bloomed along the edges of the marsh in heartbreaking shades of copper and of blue.

Suddenly, Andre was in Arielle's mind. She found herself dreaming of him, day and night, a yearning that made her feel dazed and hollow inside. She prayed for the first time that Ramon would come home. He did not. Mindy and Coaley had each other. Luisa sulked, keeping to herself when she wasn't at her mother's side. Madam Villeré remained in her room, with Blanche as constant companion. Thaddeus napped in the warm spring sun.

There was nothing to do in the house. A day spent watching the field workers at their eternal hoeing was enough. Arielle took to riding the perimeter of Villeré-in-the-Swamp, going a little farther afield, each day.

She found herself on the wooden bridge that led to the home of Andre Villeré, trying to tell herself it was an accident that she had come this far. She should turn and go back. But something pulled at her, drawing her on. It was day. Nothing could happen in the bright day. And since Pierre's arrest,

Laffite's men had been keeping to Grande Terre. Nothing could happen—

Unless Andre was here—

A pulse leaped in her throat as she rounded the curves and saw the fairy-tale house hidden in the trees. It looked as it did when she first saw it, sun mellow on the tiles, flowers blooming in profusion beyond a wall. The blue half-door to the garden still hung ajar, as if in invitation.

The house looked loved, lived in. Pressing her lips into a tight line, she dismounted. Andre just might be home. She hoped he would be. She would face him, tell him what she thought of him—and that she was now Ramon's true wife. Then she would be cured of him forever. She went to the front door and rapped, listening for the sound of answering footsteps. There were none.

The knob turned. She stepped inside.

There was none of the feel of an empty house. The windows had been cracked a little, and the fragrance of the garden seeped through, filling the cool dim interior with a fresh perfume. She stood for a moment, expecting to see Andre appear, then moved forward, compelled by curiosity and a longing to touch the things he'd touched.

What if Tauna was not truly his wife? What if the girl had deliberately lied, to rid herself of a rival? I can't make excuses for him forever, she thought miserably. Tauna, lovely amoral Tauna, was one of his lawless breed.

She went from one room to another, touching things. An open book. A pipe that looked as if he'd just put it down.

She opened the door to a bedroom, knowing instinctively that it was his. A pair of boots stood against one wall. The bed was rumpled, one corner

of it turned down as if somebody had just left it. He had slept here. Dear God, if he could have dreamed of her as she dreamed of him—

Tears filled her eyes as she touched the indentation in his pillow. Then she threw herself across the bed, clutching the pillow to her, shaking with sobs.

She lay there for a long time before she could calm herself, reliving his touch, the feel of his mouth on hers. It was over, she thought dully. Over and done. She'd been a fool for coming here.

Something rasped against her wrist as she started to rise, and she flinched away, looking numbly at her arm. There was a long red scratch, beaded with blood.

She moved the pillow aside, and found the offending object. A woman's sidecomb, a few black hairs still clinging to it. And in Andre Villeré's bed.

She replaced it carefully, covering it once more with the pillow, then left the house. Mounting her horse, she went to the curve in the lane and looked back at the small house, sleeping in the sun.

She had come here to cure herself of her dreams of Andre. And that she had done.



## Chapter 8

Spring merged into summer. In July the cane was laid by. Villeré-in-the-Swamp simmered under a brassy sun, the atmosphere damp, heavy with a smell of decay from the surrounding swampland. Arielle drifted through the days like a pale ghost, pushing back the hair from her damp forehead. Only Madam Villeré seemed to thrive on the weather.

She was able to walk a bit now. The heavy thump of her two canes resounded throughout the house as she began to take over the managerial duties, one by one. Arielle felt helpless before her. When she was a child, she had a dream of a faceless monster that kept coming and coming, breaking effortlessly through any obstacles she placed in its path. It was like that now.

She expected that, at any moment, there would

be a confrontation on the subject of Big George. Nothing was said. Madam Villeré did, however, begin to assert her authority in other areas.

She proclaimed that Luisa's marriage to Edward Allingham would take place at Christmas time. Luisa, pale and drawn these last months, gave her assent. There was no point in engaging her mother in an argument she would lose anyway.

She sought out Arielle in the garden one hot afternoon, and stood watching her for a time before she approached. The girl's soft features had fined down. The blue eyes held an unhappy, haunted expression. There seemed to be lines of sadness about her mouth as she bent to her embroidery.

She'd never been close to her sister-in-law, but she must talk to someone, Luisa thought, troubled. She sat down beside Arielle.

"It's very hot this afternoon."

Arielle looked at her, absently smoothing back her dark hair. "It certainly is," she agreed.

"Arielle, I need to talk to you."

At the note of urgency in Luisa's voice, Arielle put down her stitching and turned her attention to the girl. "Yes?"

"Do you—do you love Ramon?"

"Of course I do," Arielle lied.

"I thought perhaps—you might be in love with Andre. It looked like—"

"Forget what you saw that night, Luisa! It was only an act of gratitude. He brought me home."

"From where? He brought you home from where? That story about Matt—it wasn't true, was it? You were somewhere else—"

In spite of the humid heat, Arielle felt suddenly cold. "Are you trying to make trouble for me?" she asked, calmly.

"No! No, I'm not! All of that—it's your business. I'm just trying to straighten things out in my own mind. If you did love Andre, could you be happy married to Ramon, that's what I want to know."

Arielle forced amusement into her voice. "Since I don't love the man, it's a silly question. But to answer you, I would say yes. One's emotions are quite undependable. Marriage should be built on friendship, I think."

"But—supposing you were in love with Andre. And Ramon was planning to do something *wrong*, something that would hurt him. Wouldn't you at least go to him and tell him?"

"My loyalties would have to lie with my husband."

"But supposing he wasn't a husband, but a brother. What would you do then?"

Arielle's lips tightened. "Luisa, this is the most inane conversation I've ever heard! Get to the point. What are you trying to say?"

A scream sounded from a distance. Mindy! Arielle forgot Luisa and leaped to her feet. She rounded the house to see Madam Villeré striking at the child's legs with a cane.

"What in the name of God are you doing?" she cried, wresting the weapon from the old woman's hand.

Madam Villeré only stared at her with implacable hatred. She reached one hand for the cane; and Arielle surrendered it. Her mother-in-law turned toward the house.

Arielle knelt beside Mindy, who sobbed out her story. She had been hanging by her knees from a tree limb. She s'posed her drawers had been show-

ing. Coaley was there, and Madam Villeré had said dirty things. She was going to whip Coaley—she was going to sell him.

Arielle started into the house, white with rage, but Luisa was there before her. "You can force your will on me," the girl shouted, "but Mindy is Arielle's responsibility. If you touch her again—or Coaley—I swear, I'll go to Claiborne and tell everything I know! I swear it!"

She burst into tears and ran from the room. Arielle faced her mother-in-law. The old woman's face worked oddly for a moment, then she said, "I was merely trying to protect Mindy. You know how these nigras are."

"No, I don't," Arielle said. "I've found them to be kind and decent, for the most part. I have never seen one of them take a whip to another human being."

"It's a pity you came home," Madam Villeré spat. "Elizabeth is far more capable of rearing the child properly!"

"I'm certain of that. She might have managed to turn her into a girl as miserable as Luisa."

Arielle left the room.

She took Mindy into the house and bathed her welted legs. The little girl finally slept, and Arielle pondered on the happenings of the afternoon. What had Luisa been getting at, in that strange talk in the garden? And her threat to go to Governor Claiborne. What did she plan to tell? Of Cleone's death? Sukey's, Junie's? As far as Arielle knew, there were no laws governing an owner's treatment of the slaves who were their property. Yet she had silenced her mother effectively.

The whys and wherefores were not important.

What was important was to find a way to live in this household, and still keep Mindy a happy, carefree little girl.

There were no more problems. July passed and August moved in, bringing Ramon home with ugly news regarding the progress of the war. Word had been finally received in New Orleans that the British had effected a landing near Washington. They had set fire to the Capitol of the United States. President Madison had been forced to flee. His wife, Dolley, followed him, carrying the original copy of the Declaration of Independence with her. It was said Captain Henry Percy, R.N., had set a force of soldiers and marines ashore at Pensacola. It was commanded by Lieutenant Edward Nicholls, and was composed of a field gun, two howitzers, one hundred marines, and one thousand stand of muskets.

"Then it is almost over." There was a gleeful note in Madam Villeré's voice. "There will soon be British in the streets of New Orleans."

Surely Arielle had imagined that note of pleasure! She stared at her mother-in-law, then turned to Ramon. "What will happen?" she asked, passionately, "Ramon, I'm afraid! What will they do? Will you be hurt?"

Luisa laughed, a short, harsh sound. "Don't fret, Arielle. Ramon will be safe. It's his friends I worry about."

She left the room. For a moment, there was an embarrassed hush, then Madam Villeré purred, "I'm glad Luisa spoke up. It reminded me. She must go the city for her trousseau materials—while New Orleans is still intact. Perhaps she and Arielle might return with you, son."

Something in her tone disturbed Arielle. As she

and Ramon went to their chambers, she said, "Your mother has done some rather peculiar things of late. Do you suppose her illness could have unsettled her mind?"

Ramon smiled. "Not at all. My mother's mind is the strongest I have ever known. And anything she has done, you can be sure she is right in doing it. Are there any problems?"

"No," Arielle said, shivering. "There are none."

The party that set off for New Orleans a day or two later was hardly a gala one. Arielle had insisted upon taking Mindy along. Mindy rode with Luisa, who maintained a sullen silence. In the carriage ahead, Ramon was also silent, occupied with his own thoughts. They finally reached the city after what seemed an interminable drive. Moments after they had checked into their hotel, Ramon received a summons. The governor wished to confer with him. He left the hotel and headed for Claiborne's offices in the Cabildo, concerned at the urgency of the call.

It seemed there was a leak in the governor's security system. The British, according to word received from a reliable source, had been obtaining vital information. They knew, to a man, the number of New Orleans' defenders. They had maps of the terrain. If Ramon recalled, the question of a spy in their midst had arisen once before. He wondered if Marquez, his most trusted friend, had any ideas on the subject.

Ramon eyed the man narrowly as he spoke. "I believe I can guess as to the man's identity," he said. "But I don't want to be wrong. I intend to watch him. Give me a little time."

The governor's smile showed that the weight was lifted from his shoulders. "Thank you, Márquez.

I knew I could count on you. Start on this in the morning."

Feeling a mixture of elation and guilt, Ramon Marquez returned to the hotel, and to his wife. He'd promised his mother he wouldn't let Luisa out of his sight, but, unfortunately, he must trust Arielle to take his place. They could come to no harm doing their shopping together.

He couldn't know that Arielle already had plans for the morning. When they arrived at the hotel earlier, their visit had been marked by watching eyes. The same eyes had seen Ramon leave the hotel.

A note was written, and delivered to Arielle in her husband's absence.

*It is imperative that you come to the Henri Lanier home, tomorrow, 9:00 a.m. Come alone. Someone is ill. You are needed. Tell no one.*

Arielle read the note several times, frowning. It made no sense. Unless Lanier had taken ill, and Cora had left him. Maybe his conscience bothered him, and he was belatedly trying to establish a fatherly relationship. He owed her nothing. She owed him nothing. And why the secrecy—unless he thought Ramon would object to her visiting.

She crumpled the paper. She ought to ignore it. But her curiosity was piqued.

That night, Ramon Marquez and his wife hardly spoke to one another. Both were completely and totally preoccupied.

## Chapter 9

The next morning Arielle left the hotel clad in her most ladylike attire. This really was an idiotic thing to do, she thought to herself. She'd finally come to a decision to forget the note. Then Ramon had been so—so *careful* in instructing her in her duties as chaperone to Luisa. She was to remain with the girl at all times, not let her out of her sight. If a man spoke to her, she was to intervene as quickly as possible. If Luisa were handed a message, she must read it for herself. New Orleans blades were notorious for attempting to set up trysts.

"Good heavens!" Arielle exploded. "Your sister is a grown girl! Surely she has a mind of her own!"

"I am asking you to do this for me."

"You are not asking me, you're telling me."



Arielle's eyes blazed. "You're wanting me to be your mother's watchdog, is that it?"

"Arielle! Mamacita knows Luisa. The girl has always been—immature. Believe me, I'm asking you only to do what's best. And I haven't time to quarrel. Do this for me." He gave her a weary pleading smile, and then was gone.

She hadn't promised anything!

With the excuse that she had something personal to attend to, she sent Mindy and Luisa on their shopping expedition. When they had gone, she headed for the Lanier home.

The house, built directly on the banquette, looked deserted. The shades were drawn, the windows blind. She opened the door that led into a small courtyard that had been filled with flowering shrubs, a small fountain in the center. The fountain was dry, filled with debris. The shrubs, untrimmed, had grown into a straggling jungle.

Frowning a little, she climbed the stairs that led to the living area over the servants' quarters, and knocked at the door. There was no answer, and she turned the knob, entering. She gasped at the change since she'd last been here. The atmosphere was thick with a smell of mold. The furniture was sheeted as if the occupants had gone on a long holiday. Surely there was no one here—unless Lanier lay sick, perhaps dying, in his bedroom.

Half-choked with nervousness, she forced herself to go down the hall, opening the door to Lanier's room. Here, too, the furniture was covered. Here, too—

She gasped as someone grabbed her from behind, arms going about her, turning her to face a bearded man. The dark eyes above the beard glowed with an amber light. "Arielle! Sweetheart!"

“Andre!”

His mouth closed off the name on her lips as it pressed against them with a searing heat that turned her weak, then drew an answering fire. She felt her will leave her as he crushed her against him, one hand at her throat, undoing her collar, sliding the material away from the shoulder, his lips leaving hers to travel the line of her throat.

“It’s been so long,” he husked. “So long!”

He lifted her, one arm beneath her knees, kissing the face that lay in the crook of the other. Her long hair escaped from its moorings and fell around her shoulders as he carried her toward Lanier’s bed. Floating through the air, she caught sight of herself in a long mirror. Hair hanging, cheeks blazing, lips bruised and parted—shoulder and bosom bared—she looked like a wanton. And she was acting like one! She was the wife of Ramon Marquez. And this was the man who’d had Tauna in his bed!

“Put me down.” Her voice was cold and calm.

Andre stopped. He carefully set her to the floor and looked at her, eyes bewildered. “Arielle, I don’t understand—”

She struggled with her gown, fingers numb, pulling it back into a semblance of decency. “There is nothing to understand. We are not on an island. I am not your captive. You can’t force your will on me here.”

His face was crimson. “I forced myself on you once, granted. But those other nights—good God, Arielle!”

“I now have a husband to give me those attentions.”

He flinched. “I see,” he said dully. “Then—you are happy?”

“I am happy.” Her hands trembled as she tried

to pin up her hair. "And I find a tendency to take my marriage bonds more seriously than you do."

"I know what you must have thought when you saw me with Tauna. I can explain."

"It is not necessary," she said sharply. "I assume this meeting is your idea? That Henri Lanier is not here?"

"He's gone. He had no desire to be here when the fighting starts."

"The note said someone was ill. Since you appear to be in good health, I will go."

She started to move around him, and he caught her shoulder in a bruising grip. "Thank you for reminding me. Think what you will of me. But someone is ill, and I need your help. Now please, stand still and listen to me!"

Shrugging off his hand, she stood away from him as he continued. "It's Pierre. Pierre Laffite. He is very ill. He's also chained to a brick wall in the Cabildo. Hot, dirty, miserable. His chains leave him just enough room to sit and to lie down at night. His health has deteriorated. He is very weak—"

The thought sickened Arielle. She'd been unable to dislike the short, cross-eyed man who had treated her in such gentlemanly fashion. "I didn't put him there," she pointed out.

"Didn't you?" Andre looked at her strangely, and she remembered her confession to Claiborne. She flushed with guilt. "There's nothing I can do about it," she said, defensively.

"There is, Arielle." Andre's tone was quiet, but there was a note of desperation running through it. "Jean Laffite believes Pierre's illness is due to hopelessness. He thinks that his health will improve if he

knows he's not forgotten, that we're trying to help him, if we can. I was to take a message to him. Just a few words of complete nonsense, but something he will understand. I can't get near the Cabildo. I thought perhaps you—"

"You thought all you had to do was touch me, and I'd go running to do your bidding! Well, I've got news for you—"

"Touching you had nothing to do with Pierre, That was my own idea. I've been thinking of you, dreaming of you, ever since those nights—"

Arielle felt her knees trembling again. "I don't want to talk about it, Andre!"

"I *do* want to talk about it! But I don't have time. My horse is outside, in back. Someone might get curious as to what it's doing there. I'm asking you to do something that may help save a man's life. I'm asking you to get this to Pierre Laffite."

"I can't! There's no way—"

"There is always your good friend Governor Claiborne." He thrust the note into her hand and turned away. She watched his retreating back, struggling with the urge to say his name, to plead for an explanation of his actions.

Tauna had been in his bed. There was only one explanation for that. She thrust the note into her reticule. She had no intention of carrying out Andre's wish.

She left the Lanier house and went down the steps, pausing before she left the walled, ruined garden. She could hear the sound of hoofbeats retreating at the rear, and her throat was choked with angry tears. Andre was no part of her life now. He'd had no right to summon her here, to think he could take up where he'd left off.

And it was as she'd said. He'd tried to use his blandishments to get her to deliver a note.

She took the thing from her pocket, unfolded it and read it. As Andre said, it was nonsense.

*There is a time for Thanksgiving, it read. And more than one way to slice a loaf. The days are drugged with Autumn.*

It was inane, but certainly harmless. Perhaps it was from a poem the brothers had shared. It was clear the Laffites were well-read.

She would not deliver it, but she would try to see Pierre, discover for herself if he were in such ill health. It would do no harm to take him a basket of food.

She returned to the hotel and had a basket of victuals prepared, then went to the Cabildo to request an audience with Claiborne. If she was to see Pierre, she needed Claiborne's permission.

The governor was obviously glad to see her. "To what do I owe this pleasure, Madam Marquez?"

She was ready with her story. Pierre Laffite had been kind to her. She would like to take him some food to relieve her feeling of indebtedness.

"Why of course," Claiborne gave his assent, adding that he would escort her to Laffite's prison himself. When they reached Pierre's cell, the jailers investigated the contents of her basket.

"My orders," Claiborne said, embarrassed. "We must take no chances with this man."

"You are very wise." Arielle looked at him in wide-eyed admiration. His chest expanded a little. The jailers unlocked the door.

Pierre Laffite's condition was worse than Andre had described. His hair was shaggy and dirty above an unshaven face. The slightly crossed eyes

were red-rimmed and feverish. He blinked at her in the light, and she moved forward, setting the basket within his reach.

"I've brought you some food," she said uncertainly. He didn't answer, and she stepped closer, dipping into her reticule for a handkerchief. "It pains me to see you in such case," she said. Reaching a hand to grip his, she left the message in his palm. "I hope, if you are freed of the charges, you will see the error of your ways."

She beat a hasty retreat and left on Claiborne's arm. The bars clanged shut behind them. She didn't see Pierre Laffite unfold the crumpled paper, puzzling out the obscure sentences, his eyes filling with tears.

Arielle went directly to the hotel. Luisa and Mindy hadn't returned, and she was glad. She needed time, time to collect her shattered nerves. Seeing Andre, touching him, drawing back from his caresses, had been enough strain. The visit to Pierre's cell had been a final straw.

She should go to find her sister and sister-in-law. But it was so hot, and her head ached unbearably. She lay down, a damp cloth over eyes that burned with tears.

In the meantime, Mindy waited outside a shop where Luisa's feet were being measured for her wedding slippers. Her feet were long, narrow, with an aristocratic arch, thus presenting a problem.

Mindy was bored. This shopping expedition had been no fun at all. Luisa had hardly spoken to her. She wished Arielle was along. Or Thaddeus, or Ramon—or somebody—

Glancing up, she saw a face she recognized. Before the young soldier could pass, she scurried to

his side and caught his arm. "Lieutenant Daumont! Hello! I bet you don't remember who I am!"

He smiled down at her. "Of course I do. It's Mindy. What are you doing in New Orleans? Is your sister with you?"

"Just Luisa. She's buying her trousseau."

"I see." His face darkened. "I suppose I should speak to her. Offer my congratulations."

"I don't think she'd like that," Mindy said candidly. "She doesn't want to marry Edward. Her mother's making her do it."

Daumont stared at the child. "Good God," he said distractedly. "Mindy, where is she? Where is Luisa?"

Luisa came from the shop and halted. Louis Daumont moved toward her, and she began to tremble. "Luisa," he said in a broken voice. "Luisa!"

Luisa floated toward him, lost in a dream. He took her hand and led her toward one of the small bowerlike gardens that offered seclusion in New Orleans. Mindy was left alone.

Nobody cared about her anymore, she decided. Nobody was any fun at all. A praline seller passed, and she fished in the pocket of her pinafore for some coins. Pralines made her sick, and she'd promised Arielle she wouldn't buy them. But it didn't seem to make any difference. There was nobody there to care!

Maybe, she brightened at the thought, she would even die! Then they would all be sorry.

Louis Daumont and Luisa did not return for a long time.

## Chapter 10

The small group returned to Villeré-in-the-Swamp, leaving Ramon behind. As the days passed, drowsy and hot, work proceeded on Luisa's trousseau. Luisa seemed gentler, more tractable these days, and often smiled.

Arielle decided perhaps she'd been wrong all along. Perhaps Luisa would be happy with Edward. He certainly worshipped the ground she walked on.

The wedding gown was completed first. It made Luisa look like a tall, slender flower. The slippers she'd had made were of the same material, with narrow heels. They were a perfect complement to the gown.

Then work was begun on the costume she would wear to her new home. Of rich, crimson yel-



vet, it suited her dark eyes and complexion, making her small waist seem even tinier. Fitting the gown was a miserable process in the late autumn heat, but Luisa bore it with good grace.

Madam Villeré seemed happier too. She seemed to be bursting with some tremendous secret known to her alone, as she thumped about with her canes, discussing wedding plans.

Even Thaddeus and Mindy were to be included in the ceremony. Thaddeus would give the bride away. A new suit of rich burgundy was being stitched for him. Mindy would wear a dress of blue gauze, and would precede Arielle to the altar. They would be followed by the bride. Mindy was beside herself with excitement, and Coaley grew glum. Their adventures had turned into rehearsals as Mindy practiced walking and kneeling, talking of what she would wear and the flowers she would carry.

Coaley would rather go fishing, or search for buried treasure. The little house formed by the roots of a cypress tree, stood empty—and waiting.

In November the flurry of housecleaning began. It would soon be sugaring time. Labor must be utilized when it was at hand. Rugs were taken up and beaten. Chandeliers were washed until they glistened. Madam Villeré moved through it all, pointing with her cane. In the midst of the confusion, Ramon came home.

He was brimming with news. For one thing, Pierre Laffite had escaped. His chains had been cut, their remains still dangling from the brick wall of his cell in the Cabildo. His wardens had been interrogated. They insisted they hadn't been bribed. But perhaps they'd been drugged—

*There is a time for Thanksgiving,* the note had

read. *And more than one way to slice a loaf. The days are drugged with Autumn.*

It had not been just a consoling message Arielle had carried, but a carefully worded missive, telling Pierre Laffite when and how he would escape.

She wasn't sorry. How could she be? It wasn't Pierre who belonged in chains, awaiting trial, but his brother!

Claiborne was furious, Ramon continued. And they had received word that the British vessel was anchored off Grande Terre, and two officers, a Captain Lockyer and a Captain McWilliams, had gone ashore to work out an alliance with Laffite.

"We're sending a fleet of gunboats to wipe them out," Ramon said grimly. "It will be under the command of Commodore Patterson and Colonel J. Y. Ross. We're going to destroy Grande Terre and capture the leaders. I will accompany them. I've come home to pick up my uniform."

Arielle put a hand to his arm. "No, Ramon!" The urgency in her tone startled her, and she said, awkwardly, "I don't want you to go. You look so tired. Can't someone else—?"

"I talked Claiborne into this. I've got to see it through. But you're right. I am tired. Why don't you go on up to bed, and I'll be there as soon as I've spoken with Mamacita."

She obeyed, and he followed Madam Villeré into the study and closed the door.

Madam Villeré seated herself behind the desk and looked at him. "Well, my son?"

He began to go over his story in detail. It was true that the British had landed to talk with Laffite. They had been treated with seeming warmth and courtesy, had delivered their promises in return for

Laffite's aid, and had discussed their plan to conquer the country. They would free the slaves, give them guns, and set them, along with the Indians, against the whites. There would be great rewards.

Laffite had listened to them spell out their plan, then asked to be excused—the minute he was gone ferocious-looking Baratarians had filed into the room, surrounded the English, and dragged them outside to face hundreds of privateers, Laffite at their head.

"Kill the English spies," they'd shouted.

The British had been imprisoned at Grande Terre, then allowed to return to their ship. They had left the island amidst threats and shouts of, "Kill the British! We are Americans!"

"I do not understand it," Madam Villeré said.

"Nor do I," Ramon shrugged. "But it happened. So there is no alternative but to destroy them before they join with us."

"But, Claiborne—"

"I convinced him that their offer of cooperation is a trick. That despite rumors, Laffite has signed a pact with the English. With Grande Terre destroyed, then our people will have a clear field. I will lead them in—"

"Jackson?"

"They say he will reach New Orleans early in December. In the meantime the British fleet, under the command of Major General John Keane, is leaving Negril Bay and heading for the Chandeleurs. They also should reach here early in December. Troops will use small boats to cross Lake Borgne. I have instructed Spanish fishermen to guide them from Isle aux Pois to the mouth of Bayou Bienville. From there they will be taken to an excellent place to set up headquarters." He smiled at her question-

ing face. "The home of our esteemed relative, General Villeré, commanding officer of the militia."

"Excellent!"

Hands clasped behind his back, Ramon paced the room, brow furrowed in thought. "I would suggest you take an inventory here. Order at least a year's supplies. Perhaps Arielle might make a trip to the city for them. And it might be wise to move Luisa's wedding ahead, so that I will be set properly with a British brother-in-law."

"When do you suggest?"

"The fighting should begin no sooner than the tenth, no later than the eighteenth."

"We will hold the ceremony on the seventh."

"Good. Now all I have to do is see that the Baratarians are eliminated, and try to keep my name clear until it is too late to matter to Claiborne."

Madam Villeré looked concerned. "There is still a doubt?"

"The enemy keeps getting information only few of us have access to."

"Then I would find a guilty party! I would say a Frenchman might be at fault, perhaps trading his information with Laffite."

"You're thinking of Daumont? It might be difficult to prove."

"Anything can be proven," the old woman said. "You must find the proper way."

He sighed, then smiled. Crossing the room, he kissed her tenderly on the cheek. "I must get some rest, Mamacita. And my wife is waiting for me. I told her I wouldn't be long. Goodnight."

At his last word the slender figure standing just outside the study, ear to the door, ran away on silent feet. Luisa, heart pounding, reached her room, shut the door behind her, and leaned against it. The time

Ramon and her mother talked about for so long was coming. It was actually going to happen. The country that had been her father's was going to be ruined, and Mama and Ramon were playing a part in its destruction.

Louis Daumont was caught in the middle. He might be framed for something he didn't do—or killed.

She thought of the plans she and Louis had made. He would come for her in the night. Together they would journey to New Orleans to be married.

In the meantime she had pretended to be resigned to marrying Allingham. Biding her time, she'd played at being a dutiful daughter, so that Mama wouldn't hate her too much in the end.

Mama! Always, she'd thought of her first. Now it was time to do something for Luisa!

She must find a way to get to New Orleans and to Louis—before the wedding—before the British—before it was too late.

Oh, dear God!

The next morning, after Ramon had left, Luisa went to Arielle. "Mama says you're going to New Orleans for supplies. I need a few more things. I'm going with you."

Arielle shook her head. "I've already discussed it with your mother. She said you might give me a list. With the ceremony set up as it is, you will need your rest."

That evening Luisa hung her wedding gown on a rod in her dressing room. "To steam the wrinkles out," she explained to Mindy. She set her shoes on the small shelf that held soap and scented oils to show Mindy how well the slippers matched the dress. Then she sent to the kitchen, asking that boiling water be brought to fill the tub. Waiting

until Mindy had left the room, she swept the shoes into the tub of hot water, then went out, closing the door behind her.

It was Mindy who discovered the ruined slippers the next morning. The soles had curled, the fabric parted from its foundation.

Luisa, as torn with nerves as she was, had no difficulty creating very real tears. "I expect Shug did it," she sobbed to Arielle. "You know how clumsy she is. And nothing else will suit the gown. Oh, Arielle, what am I going to do?"

"I can get another pair for you—"

"But they would not fit my feet! I can't go barefoot to my wedding!"

It was agreed that Luisa would have to accompany Arielle to New Orleans.

They did not know that she was leaving Villeré-in-the-Swamp forever; that she would not be coming home.

## Chapter 11

The trip to New Orleans was delayed as long as possible. A cold damp had set in. The sugaring-off began with problems this year, carts miring down in the rich mud of the cane fields. The roof of the big house developed a leak that had to be repaired. Mindy caught a chill, and suffered from a cough and fever. Madam Villeré complained of feeling unwell. The Allinghams, now that they were soon to be relations, were constantly underfoot and had to be fed and entertained. And there was no message from Ramon to say that he would be in the city to meet them.

On December 1st, with the wedding only days away, it was decided that the journey could wait no longer. The entourage this time would consist of four carriages. Arielle was dismayed at the list of things

she must purchase in as little time as possible. In addition to the usual Christmas shopping, she must buy a number of items for the household. And, of course, Luisa's slippers.

Even worse, Arielle felt she was catching Mindy's cold. Her head ached. Despite the covered carriage, her clothes were damp. She was chilled to the bone. Luisa, pale and quiet beside her, evidently didn't feel much better. It wouldn't be much of a wedding ceremony with both bride and bride's maid red-nosed and sniffing! They must have a hot bath the minute they reached the hotel; and a hot meal brought in. Then she would send a message for Ramon. Perhaps he could take over responsibility for part of her lengthy shopping list.

When they arrived at the hotel, Arielle was feeling miserable. Luisa, surprisingly, took over. She ordered hot water brought up. When Arielle was unable to eat, she sent down for a mug of hot buttered rum. Finally, Arielle felt warm and drowsy.

"I must send to tell Ramon we're here."

"You go to bed. I will attend to it." Luisa helped Arielle into her nightdress. "You will feel better in the morning."

Arielle slept, and Luisa composed a note. It read, *Tomorrow morning, back door of shop where you found me before.* She didn't sign it. He would know. She folded the missive and wrote a name across it in large letters. *Lieutenant Louis Daumont.* Then she called for a messenger to deliver it.

Before she went to her own bed she looked in on Arielle. "You sent the message?" Arielle mumbled, sleepily.

"Indeed, I did."

Luisa could not sleep for praying. "*Let him be*



*there. Dear God, let him be there!*" Louis Daumont might have been sent from the city on a mission. She hadn't considered that eventuality before. And if he were gone, what would she do? Dear God, what would she do!

Arielle woke the next morning to see the windows streaked with a mizzling rain. The streets seemed to be filled with a din that resembled Mardi Gras. She stepped out on the balcony and looked down. The banquettes were thronged with people. They were looking toward the north with expectant faces.

A hotel servant clarified the situation. General Andrew Jackson's arrival was anticipated. Everyone in the area, Cajun, Creole, American, French, Spanish, and Negro, was wanting to get a glimpse of the great man.

There would be a parade, with Plauche's Guards, St. Geme's carbiniers, and the chasseurs of Captain Guilbert. The glittering Fèliciana Dragoons had been sent to the city limits to serve as guard of honor. It would be a sight, yes! A pity it was raining.

"Yes," Arielle said. "A pity."

What awful luck, she thought as she dressed. It would be almost impossible to make one's way through the crowds below. And it was possible most business places would be closed. The citizens of New Orleans were like children when festivities were concerned. Luisa commiserated with her, though secretly she was glad. The more crowded the streets, the less conspicuous her own escape.

Dressed warmly, carrying umbrellas that had to be folded due to the press of humanity, the two women dared the streets. They were jostled roughly, and Arielle wished sincerely that Ramon was pres-

ent. If he hadn't been away, he would have answered her note.

Then she saw him. He was riding at Governor Claiborne's side, resplendent in his uniform. How handsome he was, she thought with a surge of pride. She did not see Luisa's face go white, or notice that the girl was backing from her, into the crowd.

For coming to meet Claiborne was a dazzling group of horsemen in blue and silver. The Feliciana Dragoons. Their ranks parted, and a cheer went up, dying on a ragged note of bewilderment as the people of New Orleans got their first glimpse of the hero whose coming had been so long awaited.

Andrew Jackson cut a drab figure against the brilliant plumage of his escort. He was tall and gaunt, with a grim long jaw and piercing eyes. He had on an ancient leather cap and a dirty, torn blue Spanish cape. It and his high boots were caked with mud. The uniform beneath the cape was tattered.

He was exhausted from a battle, a long ride, and a bout of dysentery. The rain didn't help. He'd been steeling himself against a chill. But he wasn't so far gone that he didn't know a pretty girl when he saw one. He smiled down at Arielle; a brief smile that transformed him into a gentle, kindly man.

Then he was gone.

This man would either save New Orleans, or go down with it. Arielle knew she had glimpsed a moment of history. She turned to Luisa. "I think that he—"

She stopped, feeling foolish at the sight of strange faces round her. She'd been talking to no one. Luisa seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Arielle wasn't completely alarmed at first. Luisa had been terribly upset about the loss of her slippers and concerned at getting new ones made in time.

She was a solitary type of girl who didn't care for crowds. And the shoemaker's shop was just a short distance away. She would have gone there.

Arielle made her way toward it, struggling against the pressure of bodies that jammed the street.

The shop was empty. Even the shoemaker was missing. Maybe Luisa had gone in search of him. Arielle sat down to wait. The shoemaker returned. He had been watching the parade. No, he hadn't seen the young lady.

Fearing Luisa might be ill, Arielle returned to the hotel. The girl wasn't there. Arielle's mind was filled with dreadful imaginings. She could see Luisa being trampled by a fractious horse, lying bloody in the street—or abducted by some ruffian as she herself had been.

She waited for one hour, then went to find Ramon. Ramon, in turn, set out in search of Louis Daumont. He was not in his quarters, nor was he in the Cabildo offices. Going to Claiborne, he learned the young Frenchman had requested a leave-of-absence, only this morning.

Ramon's shoulders sagged, then he stiffened them again. "You asked me to find the leak in our security," he said, "and I have. I suggest a warrant be sworn for the arrest of Lieutenant Louis Daumont."

Luisa wasn't found for nearly a week. In that time Ramon delegated subordinates to gather the list of supplies for Villeré-in-the-Swamp, to load them, and to escort the stunned Arielle home. He sent a sealed message to his mother with her. She had no idea what it contained, but the wedding ceremony was cancelled. Madam Villeré kept to her

room. The house seemed to settle into a period of quiet waiting.

Meanwhile, soldiers searched New Orleans. It was learned that Louis Daumont had been seen briefly in a certain area. The area was narrowed down to a shabby street, and finally to a small and unpretentious house.

Two guardsmen broke in the door to discover their former comrade-at-arms frantically trying to dress, while a half-naked girl clung weeping to his arm.

Louis Daumont was under arrest.

He was taken straight to Governor Claiborne. Ramon stood stiffly at the governor's side as his young French counterpart was brought in. A crowd had gathered at the door, and Luisa, her gown buttoned crookedly, dark hair mussed, tried to fight her way in.

"They want Daumont, not his doxy," a man said, pushing her back.

"You fool," Luisa gritted, "I'm his wife!" She caught sight of Ramon. "Ramon, help me! Tell them Louis is—"

"I accuse Louis Daumont of being a traitor to his country," Ramon said formally, his lips white. "He has used his office to dispense information to the enemy. I request that he be placed in custody until he can be tried—for treason."

"No! Oh God, no!" Luisa's voice was thin with terror. "Governor Claiborne! Don't listen to him! He's the traitor! It is he, who is plotting to lead the British in! He—!"

"Louis Daumont is further guilty of using his—his powers of persuasion to subvert my sister's loyalties. You know my family, Governor. Luisa has been reared in a sheltered manner. I cannot think she

realizes the extent of his crime. I beg you to release her in my charge. I will stand responsible for her."

"I'd rather die," Luisa raged. "Governor, you must listen—" Her voice faltered away as she saw the man's embarrassed, pitying eyes. He didn't believe her! He believed Ramon.

"Take this man to the Cabildo. Put him in chains." Claiborne gestured toward Daumont. "And you, child—go home with your brother. Your family loves you. Just remember that."

Ramon moved toward his sister, putting a hand on her arm. She broke away, clutching at Claiborne. "Ramon's lying! They've been planning this for years! He and my mother—"

"Your mother! Good God!" He looked at Ramon, his eyes filled with horror. "The girl's unbalanced. You'd better get her home as soon as possible."

Luisa began to fight as Ramon reached for her again. Guards attempted to subdue her. Finally, her gown torn, fingernails ripped and bleeding, hair wild, she was tied hand and foot and taken to a carriage waiting below.

Claiborne, left in his office, shook his head. "A pity. Such a fine family." He looked at Louis Daumont, still standing white-faced before him. "Get this man the hell out of my sight," he said, his voice dark with loathing, "before I kill him on the spot."

He sat down at his desk for a moment after Daumont was gone, trying to pull himself together. He had a meeting very soon, at Jackson's headquarters. Whether he liked it or not, he was going to have to sit down at a conference table with Jean Laffite—at Jackson's request.

The attack on Grande Terre had been a farce. Not a single shot had been returned by the Bara-

tarians. Most of them had melted into the swamps, but eighty had come forward and allowed themselves to be arrested, among them, Dominique You.

Following the attack, pressure had been brought by John Blaque of the legislature, and by the attorneys, Livingston and Grymes. They asked that Laffite's case be heard and considered. Claiborne drew a letter from his desk and read it over.

*This point of Louisiana, which I occupy, Laffite wrote, is of great importance in the present crisis. I tender my services to defend it.* He asked for pardons for himself and his men, then continued, *I am a stray sheep, wishing to return to the sheepfold.*

Claiborne frowned. He hoped to God Laffite didn't turn out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Jackson trusted the man. And the way things stood, with the British eyeing Barataria as the back door to the nation, they didn't have much choice left. Damn! He'd wanted to take young Marquez along with him to the meeting. But the poor devil had enough troubles of his own right now.

Claiborne would have to make his own decision about joining forces with Laffite—and hope to hell he was right. He'd been a stubbornly righteous man all his life, and it galled him to have to deal with what he considered a lawless, criminal element. But the fate of a nation was at stake. Without Laffite's aid, they hadn't a prayer.

Shaking his head, Claiborne gathered up his papers and set off to a meeting with his enemy and ally, Jean Laffite.

## Chapter 12

Toward dawn the next morning, Arielle woke to the sound of someone in her room. She put out a hand, seeking Mindy who had been sleeping with her since her return from the ill-fated New Orleans journey. The little girl turned and moaned in her sleep and Arielle sat up, parting the curtains that swathed the bed.

She saw a man's figure in the dim light. Ramon, in the act of stripping off his shirt.

"Ramon! You're home. Luisa—did you find her?"

"I found her." His voice was grim.

"But—where—!"

"I can't waste time talking about Luisa," he growled. "*Dios*, woman! I must start back in less than an hour. And I want to spend that time with my wife, not discussing my sister's actions."

"But she is safe—"

"She is safe, I assure you." Still clad in his trousers, he came toward her. "Sweetheart, I've wanted you—"

"Mindy's here," Arielle warned him. "She's been sleeping with me since Luisa—"

He swore softly under his breath, then scooped the little girl up and carried her to the room he'd used in the first year of their marriage. Arielle heard him shoot the bolt on the door as he returned.

He parted the curtains and stood looking down at her for a moment, then he took her roughly, with a kind of desperation that was unlike him.

Rolling away, he said, "Damn it! Just this once, couldn't you respond?" He made a harsh sobbing sound, and she realized he was crying. Moving close to him, she took him in her arms and cradled his head against her breast, holding him like a child.

"I'm sorry. You startled me. I wasn't quite awake."

"You've never loved me, have you?" He went on in an odd, dull voice. "And I suppose I haven't loved you in the way a man should love his wife. But a man has needs—"

"Ramon, I'm very fond of you. You know that! Now, tell me what's wrong with you! Are you sick?"

"I suppose I am, in a way. Sick of myself."

Arielle sat up. "This has something to do with Luisa, doesn't it? Or the raid on Grand Terre—it wasn't successful?"

"It has to do with everything I am," he said soberly. "I wish things could have been different."

"Ramon, you're not making sense!"

"No, not even to myself. I've always considered myself honest, loyal. And yet I seem to have be-



trayed everyone I've ever loved, except, perhaps, my mother. The mark of Cain—"

"I don't understand," Arielle said helplessly.

"I don't understand myself. Arielle, don't talk. Don't ask questions. Just hold me."

She lay close to him, arms around him, and finally his shuddering stilled. She thought he slept, until he rose suddenly and began to dress. "I must go."

She slid out of bed and stood beside him, then followed him to the door. He turned and put his arms around her, pulling her to him, caressing her with frantic, memorizing hands.

"Arielle," he groaned, "I do love you. In a different way, but I love you. Remember that, if I don't come back."

"The fighting," she said through stiff lips. "It is about to begin?"

"Soon, I think." He put her from him gently. "I must go." His eyes were dark with a strange emotion. Fear? Premonition?

"Ramon, wait—"

But he was gone.

There was no thought of returning to sleep. Arielle donned a robe and knotted its belt about her waist. She went to the window. In a few minutes she heard the sound of hooves on the wooden bridge. Ramon was gone.

Frowning, she paced the room, pondering on the events that had taken place since she had been awakened from her sleep. Ramon had been distraught, half out of his mind. But why?

She'd been going mad with worry over Luisa, feeling responsible for losing her in the crowd; hating herself for not having been closer to the girl.

He'd said she was safe—but was she? Were Ramon's actions due to grief? Was he trying to spare her?

And the remark about the mark of Cain! Cain had killed his brother. Oh God—Andre! Perhaps Andre was killed in the attack on Grande Terre.

Suddenly, Arielle couldn't bear to be alone with her thoughts. She started for the chamber beyond the dressing room. She would wake Mindy.

No, Mindy had been stricken since Luisa's disappearance. She'd had nightmares, tossing and turning. She would let the child sleep.

She went down to the kitchen. Cook might be up and preparing things for the day ahead. If she were not, Arielle would make herself a cup of coffee. Approaching the door, she heard movement. Thank God. This morning, she would be grateful for company—any company.

She stopped short at the sight of Blanche. The woman bent over a tray containing a cup of coffee and some small cakes. She was pouring something into the coffee from a brown bottle. Arielle recognized it as the laudanum, usually kept in Madam Villeré's room. She stepped forward and Blanche jumped, guiltily. The bottle was inserted into her apron pocket in a flash.

"You skeert me, Missie."

"I'm sorry," Arielle apologized. She indicated the tray. "Is your mistress ill?"

"Jes' hongry." Snatching up the prepared food, she backed through the doorway. Arielle heard her, heavy-footed, going up the stairs.

Puzzled, Arielle poured herself some coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. She might have been wrong about the drug. But there was a sense of

strangeness about the house this morning. She was sure of it when Shug came in. The woman looked like she'd been up all night. Her jaw was set and her eyes red, as if she'd been crying.

"There's something wrong, Shug. What is it?"

The Negress didn't look at her, but mumbled something about comings and goings in the night keeping decent folks from their beds.

"Shug, do you know anything about Luisa?"

Shug's eyes jerked toward her sharply, and then away. "Ol' Shug don' know nuffin'."

Arielle had a growing feeling that Luisa was in the house. That Ramon had brought her home. Finishing her coffee, she hurried to the girl's room and tapped at the door. When there was no answer, she pushed it gently open. The room was empty. In the dressing room, the wedding gown still swayed on its hanger. A lovely, wistful ghost.

Madam Villeré appeared at the breakfast table that morning, for the first time since Luisa vanished. She looked old and tired, but her eyes showed no sign that she had taken laudanum.

The Allinghams called in the afternoon. Luisa's name was not mentioned. Madam Villeré poured tea for them, and they discussed the weather. It had been bad this year. The sugaring was delayed. It might run on into January. Elizabeth, between bites, mentioned that sunshine was badly needed. Linens that were dried indoors were never white.

"How is Bathilde working out for you?" Madam Villeré asked.

Elizabeth flushed, and Edward, gulping and bobbing, said, "Not too well, I'm afraid. She has an odd personality. Elizabeth is rather frightened of the woman."

Madame Villeré passed a tray of small sandwiches. "Perhaps," she purred, "you would consider trading back? I could use her in the house. Arielle is carrying too much of the burden, since—," she paused.

"No," Arielle said in alarm. "I don't need help."

She was overridden by the Allinghams, both babbling their acceptance of their hostess's kind offer. Bathilde would arrive at Villeré-in-the-Swamp the very next morning.

To her own relief, Arielle rarely saw her. For a brief period, when the rain stopped and the sun came out, Arielle was kept busy at the sugar mill. Then it began to rain again. She arrived at the plantation house, soaked to the skin. Pulling off her wet cloak and gown, she donned dry clothing, worrying about the crop. She hoped Madam Villeré wouldn't use the problems this year as a wedge against Big George.

She didn't hear Mindy behind her until the little girl spoke.

"Arielle?"

Arielle whirled, laughing. "You startled me." She stopped at the woebegone expression on Mindy's face. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Mindy burst into tears. "You've got to help me. I don't know what to do! Thaddeus Lindenwood's too old. And Coaley's scared of Bathilde. Bathilde has the keys—"

Arielle knelt beside her. "Mindy, I haven't the slightest idea what you're trying to say. Start over from the beginning. Has Bathilde hurt you in any way?"

"No, but I'm scared she might hurt Luisa."

*Luisa!*

Mindy's words jolted Arielle back on her heels.

Luisa was somewhere on the plantation then. The surly Bathilde had been brought back for a purpose, to guard over the girl. Luisa was a prisoner somewhere. But why?

Arielle gathered her sister close. "Tell me about it, Mindy. Begin at the first. I can't help until I know what's going on."

Mindy, snuffling, spoke against Arielle's shoulder. She'd awakened the morning Ramon left to find Arielle gone. It was not yet light. Surprised to find herself in another bed, she'd opened the door a crack and peeped out. There were muddy footprints, barely visible in the gray dawn. She'd followed them. They'd led to a room at the end of the hall, where it turned. The door was locked.

Hearing approaching footsteps, Mindy had ducked into the next room. Through a crack, she'd watched Blanche unlock the door and enter with a tray.

"How do you know it is Luisa in there?"

"I saw her." She went on to relate how, after Bathilde came, she and Coaley saw Luisa's face at the window. Then Bathilde jerked her away.

Dear God! Arielle had visions of Cleone, of Junie. She had to find some way to get the keys.

"Luisa said to tell you she needs you," Mindy said. "She said to hurry. It's important."

"You've talked to her?"

"There's a balcony on the next room, then a kind of ledge. It isn't dangerous if you hang on to the drain pipe," the child added, defensively. "There are bars on the window and she talked through the bars. That was early this morning. When I went back, she wouldn't wake up—"

The laudanum, Arielle thought, dazed. The tray was for Luisa. They were keeping her drugged.

"She's sleeping," she told Mindy, trying to keep the fear from her voice. "They gave her something to make her sleep. I'll have to talk to her in the morning, long before daylight. Can you wake up then? I'll need you to show me how—"

"Of course I can," Mindy said scornfully. Then she looked at her sister. "I don't know if you can make it. Your feet are so big."

Arielle looked down. Perhaps her feet were large compared to Mindy's child's foot, but she could negotiate the same path. She would have to.

That night she lay awake, trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together. Ramon had evidently brought Luisa home on that last night. Luisa had probably run away to avoid marrying Edward Allingham, but that was no reason to keep her locked up like a caged bird, or to drug the girl.

Luisa wasn't exactly a normal personality, with her love-hate relationship with her mother. Was it possible that her mind had broken under the strain? That she was locked away due to madness?

And why hadn't Ramon told her?

She didn't realize she had slept at all until she felt Mindy's hand on her shoulder. In gown and slippers, she followed her little sister down the hall. There it turned, lined with linen and storage closets, except for two rooms at the end. They entered the empty one. There was a globe of the world, several small desks furred with dust. Apparently it had been used long ago as a schoolroom.

Mindy strained at the window. It opened slowly, inch by inch. And the two of them looked out into the rain-wet darkness. The balcony was small, intended for ornament rather than usage. Arielle stepped onto it, gingerly, and looked down. It was a

long way to the ground. And in that brief pause, she was soaked through.

"Can you see the ledge? Put your hand down beside the railing. You can feel it." Mindy's voice was taut with excitement. Arielle located the ledge, and her heart sank. It was less than an inch wide, its surface slippery and wet. She kicked off her slippers and stepped over the railing, holding fast to the slimy drainpipe that ran overhead and down beside the window of the room that was Luisa's. How had Mindy managed it! She would have had to stand on tiptoe—

Heart beating in her throat, not daring to look down, Arielle inched her way along the ledge. When one hand gripped the bars that criss-crossed the window, she felt suddenly faint. Steadying herself, she lifted her other hand and rapped at the window.

She could see a faint movement in the dim room. Someone was coming to the window. Dear God, what if she came face to face with Bathilde! Perhaps the woman slept here—

It was not Bathilde, but Luisa. She opened the window and grasped at Arielle's fingers with claw-like hands. Her face was a white oval in the darkness, her hair wild. She looked—mad.

"Arielle! Thank God! Oh, thank God!" Luisa's voice was high, hysterical. "I've got to know if you're in with them! The plot—Mama said she'd kill me if I told—but I've never been sure—"

Arielle flinched away from the clutching fingers, then got a new grip on the bars. It was worse than she thought. The girl was a raving maniac. She forced her voice to a calm note. "Luisa, I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Then you'll help me. I know it will hurt to betray Ramon, but it would be worse—"

"I have no intention of betraying my husband, Luisa. I will talk to him, see that you are released, given medical attention—"

Luisa laughed, a bloodchilling sound that was more frightening than her ravings.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you. Well, I'm not yet, but I soon may be. To show you how sane I am, let me tell you a few things!

"Ramon never was your husband! Oh, he married you, but he never loved anybody but Cleone. It was his baby she was carrying! And he was beginning to take their relationship seriously. Why did you think Mama was so anxious to get him married off?"

Arielle swayed sickly, gripping the bars with both hands. Luisa continued with her bitter tirade. When Ramon married, Cleone felt betrayed. She went to Andre with what she knew of Ramon's plans. Mama found out and killed her. Beat her to death, just as she did Junie. Ramon was giving Claiborne's secrets to the British, in return for a high government post when New Orleans had fallen. It was Mama's idea. Just as accusing Louis Daumont had been her plan. Louis, whom she had run away to marry, was now chained in the Cabildo. She'd tried to tell Claiborne the truth about Mama and Ramon but he hadn't believed her.

Luisa's voice had grown quieter, more rational as she talked. It was light enough to see her face now, eyes closed, tears streaking her cheeks.

"I'll try to help you," Arielle said dully.

"You can't help me. But there is something you can do. The British are coming in by way of Lake



Borgne. Ramon has made arrangements to guide them. They plan to take over General Villeré's plantation. It will be used as headquarters. Our own relatives may be killed!" She stifled a sob. "Tell them what I told you. Tell them to warn Claiborne—Arielle, I hear Bathilde coming—"

Arielle sidled from the window, taking a grip on the drain pipe, and flattened herself against the wall. She heard the clang of a tray, then the window slammed down. She made her way back to the balcony, feeling it give beneath her weight. Inside the room she found her knees wouldn't hold her. She sank to the floor.

"Are you all right?" Mindy worried.

"I will be in a minute. Just give me time."

They returned to Arielle's chambers. She stripped off her wet gown, and changed into an outfit suitable for riding. To Mindy's questioning she said only that Luisa had suggested she go to the Villerés on the mainland for help. The skies were clearing. She would breakfast first, and leave on the pretense of going to the sugar-house.

Actually, she needed time to think.

She was still pondering Luisa's words as she left the plantation and headed for the plantation of General Villeré. The story fitted together neatly with what she'd seen and observed. An autocratic old woman. A pathetically devoted son. Because of his mother, Ramon Marquez had betrayed the girl he loved—and now he was a traitor to his friends and relatives—to his country. He was suffering deeply. He'd said as much, on that last morning—

The rain had stopped earlier. Now the sun shone down with violence, turning the day into one of muggy heat. Around Arielle, the swamps steamed. She didn't see a single living creature on

her ride. No squirrels scurried in her path. No birds sang.

Shortly after noon, she caught sight of a clearing ahead and knew she had reached her objective. She started to ride into the open, then jerked her horse to a halt, fighting the animal back into the dappled shade.

She was too late. The Villeré plantation was already overrun. The uniforms of the British were everywhere. Ramon, to satisfy his mother's ambition, had turned traitor to his own kin.

She turned the horse. She would ride to Governor Claiborne. But a bloody hand gripped the bridle, and she looked down, horrified, into a man's bleeding, furious face.

Gabriel Villeré, the general's son!

## Chapter 13

The young major tugged at the bridle, and led Arielle far back into the swamp before he spoke. Then he told her the story. He'd been napping on the front porch when the plantation was surrounded suddenly by British. He'd leaped from his chair and shot into the house, shouting a warning. Then he'd dived through a back window, thus accounting for his wounds.

His boots were still sitting on the porch. He stood in his stocking feet. He'd been trying to figure a way to get a horse and go for help.

Arielle slid from her mount. "Take this one," she said.

"I can't do that!" He looked at her in horror, his gallantry affronted.

"Don't be a fool! Ride to warn Claiborne. And tell him—tell him," she swallowed, "tell him Louis

Daumont is not guilty of the charges brought against him. That the espionage in his service can be credited to Ramon Marquez."

"Good God!" Her bleak face told him it was true. He mounted the horse. He would go first to Versailles, the plantation of his friend, Denis de la Ronde. They would ride to New Orleans together.

Arielle watched him go, then began the long walk back to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. As night fell, her feet were blistered. Red eyes glowed at her from the foliage along the path. Something heavy crashed through the underbrush and moved off into the darkness. Normally she would have been fearful—but not now.

Now she could only think of the captured Villerés, who had been kind to her; of Ramon who had brought them to such an end. If Ramon and his mother were traitors, then what was Andre Villeré? It wasn't possible that they could be working toward the same goal.

Ah God, if she had misjudged him—as she had Ramon—

Almost at the end of her endurance, she staggered over the arched bridge that led to her home. Her heart sank as she saw that the house blazed with light. She had been missed. She would face a battery of questions upon her entrance.

As she entered the front door, Shug shouldered past her, her face a mask of terror. Arielle put out a staying hand.

"Let me go, Missie. Let ol' Shug go," she pleaded. "Ol' Missus done gone into some kinda fit. Don' let her hurt that chile—"

Child? Mindy? Arielle threw open the door to the parlor. The scene before her froze her to the spot. Madam Villeré sat in a gilt chair, facing the

door. Her face was enameled, her hair lacquered high and crowned with a glittering tiara. Its glitter was echoed in the woman's mad eyes. Blanche stood beside her, like a sentinel, and Luisa was huddled at her mother's knee, weeping. She raised a bruised face at Arielle's entrance.

"Ariel!" Mindy's voice burst out. "Be careful. She's—sick!"

Arielle whirled to see Mindy and Thaddeus Lindenwood flattened against the wall, the burly Bathilde guarding them.

"Silence," her mother-in-law said in a commanding voice. Sick, indeed. She had never felt better in her life! When the message came from Ramon, saying that all was going well, that he would be here tonight, a conqueror, she'd felt the power begin to rise in her. It hummed and thrummed through her veins like an anthem. A victory anthem. She had always known who she was and what she was destined to be. Now she and Ramon would occupy their proper places.

She need not wait for that final moment of triumph. Now she intended to deal with this girl who had dared to defy her authority.

"Mother Villeré—"

"I did not give you leave to speak," she said, noting the fear in Arielle's eyes with satisfaction. "Things have changed. You are Ramon's wife, but you will be subordinate to me. Stand on that spot." She pointed a beringed, imperious finger. "Where have you been?"

"Just—riding," Arielle lied.

The woman's hard eyes looked her up and down, taking in her torn habit, mud-soaked and draggled, with a smug smile.

"I repeat, where have you been?"

Arielle stiffened. "I rode to warn the Villerés at Beká," she said, hotly. "But I was too late. The plantation had already been taken by the British, thanks to you and your son!"

"Beká is taken," the woman said with dreamy pleasure. "A new reign has begun. The Villerés will be tried and hanged, the French driven from our shores, the Americans forced to return to their own country. We, my son and I, will rule in the name of Spain—"

"You are insane," Arielle gasped as her mother-in-law's voice rose to a fanatical pitch. "Insane!"

The expression of pleasure faded, to be replaced by a look of sly cunning. "Blanche—the object in the corner. Will you lift the covering."

Blanche moved to do her bidding. Arielle saw that her face had an underlying ashen cast. She, too, knew that her mistress had gone mad. Then the reason for her pallor was displayed as she pulled up the corner of a sheet.

Beneath it was a face, cast in yellow wax, a round blue hole in the forehead.

A dead man.

Arielle's nails cut into her palms as she clenched her fists to keep from crying out. "An—intruder?" she ventured.

"I did not give you leave to speak," Madam Villeré reminded her, coldly. "But I am prepared to be generous. Blanche, suppose you explain the situation."

The black woman covered the corpse with evident relief and approached Arielle, fishing in her apron pocket. "He a messenger," she said. "He brung this fo' you, Missie." She handed Arielle a folded paper.

Arielle, it read. *Leave the house at once, taking*

*what members of the family will go. The place will soon be a battleground. My messenger will take you to a safe place. It was signed, Andre.*

"It is a lie," her mother-in-law said. "A lie that dreadful boy concocted to frighten me, perhaps cause a change in plans. But he didn't succeed, did he!" Her voice grew higher. "He didn't succeed! The British will be coming here! Officers, nobles—here!"

"Mother Villeré!" Arielle's voice cracked like a whip. "You are welcome to think what you wish. But I'm taking Mindy and Thaddeus—yes, and Luisa, too. We are getting out of here. I suggest you come, too."

She stopped short. Madam Villeré lifted an ornate fan of spangles and plumes from her velvet lap, holding it in her left hand. In her right, she held what the fan had concealed. A small and deadly looking gun.

"You are going nowhere," she said. "You failed in your mission today, but by your own words, you are an informer. Too, you have apparently been dealing with Andre Villeré behind your husband's back."

"And you intend to shoot me?" Arielle was surprised at the steadiness of her tone.

"I intend to make an example of you. Perhaps it will give Luisa pause to think."

The gun raised, steady in her jeweled hand.

"Wait," Arielle said, faintly. "Let the others go. Let Mindy and Thaddeus go. Then do what you will."

Thaddeus Lindenwood stepped forward, interrupting. "I pray thee, Madam, hear me out. I am the guilty party. I have been dealing with this—," his rumbling voice paused as he searched for the name,

"—this Andre fellow. Arielle was innocent of the message she carried. It is I—"

The woman laughed. "Forgive me, sir, if I do not believe you. In any case, I have no intention of destroying you. You will make a fine addition to our Court. Every court must have its jester."

He shrank visibly, as Madam Villeré turned back to Arielle. The girl was obviously frightened. The older woman could feel the power surging within her, growing, growing. Ramon's wife had defied her, humiliated her. And now the tables were turned. She raised the gun once more.

"You're wanting to kill me before Ramon comes," Arielle said softly. "You are afraid he won't allow it, aren't you! That even if I tell him I tried to warn the Villerés, prove it to him, he won't listen to you! You thought he was your puppet, didn't you! That you could pull the strings and he would jump! But you know he loves me! He won't let you hurt me."

Her face splotched beneath its enamel coating, Madam Villeré struggled to her feet. "You're lying," she shrilled. "He doesn't care about you! His country comes first! His mother—"

"Then prove it!"

Madam Villeré sank back, willing the pulse that throbbed painfully in her breast to slow. The pistol pointed at Arielle, the round eye of death.

"Very well," the older woman purred. "We will wait. He will be here soon."

It was just as well, she thought. An execution should take place at dawn. She would have her chair placed on the veranda. Ramon's troops would stand in formation. Her handsome son would raise his saber—and lower it, as a signal for the firing squad.



Arielle stood rigid, waiting. She dared not take her eyes from her mother-in-law, not even to give Mindy a glance of reassurance. She had bluffed, and won—for the moment. But she had no idea what Ramon would do. Geared to absolute obedience as he had been all of his life, what action would he take if he must make a choice between her and his mother? The woman seemed to have a hypnotic hold on him.

She would rather die now than to know Ramon would go along with this dreadful farce. But she must buy as much time for the others as she could. Perhaps Andre's men would arrive—

For a time, she could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart, and the soft sound of Luisa's weeping. Then the front door burst open. There was a sound of booted feet.

"Ramon," his mother said, with satisfaction. As he entered the room, she concealed the weapon with her fan.

With no eyes for anyone else, he strode to face his mother. "It's done," he said, shortly. "The Villeré plantation is secured. The landing was accomplished with secrecy, and our victory is assured. My troops are less than ten minutes behind me. Everything has worked out as you wished."

"I am proud of you, son."

"And I loathe myself," he said harshly. He turned to Arielle, his eyes dark pools of unhappiness, his face lined and weary. "I don't have time to explain," he said in a hopeless voice. "I can only ask that you forgive me when I do."

His mother's voice rose. "Don't be a fool, Ramon! She rode to the Villeré plantation today! To betray you! Thank God, she was too late!"

He turned his dark gaze to Arielle, seeing the truth in her eyes.

"Perhaps it would have been better if she hadn't been."

"Ramon!" The old woman's voice quivered. "What has gotten into you? This is the happiest day of our lives! We will rule—"

"I am going to refuse any offices, Mamacita. I have paid too high a price already. I just want to live here quietly, with Arielle, if she'll have me—"

"She's a traitor, I tell you," Madam Villeré screeched. "A traitor! And she's trying to lead you along the same path! I won't have it! I've worked too long for this! I won't have it!"

The weapon was out in the open once more, pointed steadily at Arielle, and there was murder in the woman's face. Arielle closed her eyes.

Ramon dived forward. "No, Mama! No!"

And as he moved, Luisa moved too. She gripped the pudgy wrist, twisting her mother's arm. And the gun exploded.

Arielle flinched, waiting to feel the pain. She opened her eyes to see Ramon turn toward her. He gave her one long look as if to memorize her features, then crumpled slowly to the floor.

It took an eternity for him to fall.

Then Arielle was on her knees beside him, oblivious to the weapon clutched in her mother-in-law's hand. "Ramon," she said in an agonized whisper. "Ramon!"

Her voice trailed off as she realized that he did not hear her; that he would never hear her again. She lifted his head, cradling it in her lap, smoothing his dark hair as she did on the day he'd claimed to be one of the happiest of his life.

Behind her, Madam Villeré sat in her thronelike chair, her mad eyes growing dull with realization. Her painted cheeks sagged as she returned to a kind of sanity.

And sanity was too much to bear. She lifted the gun once more, placed it against her breast, and pulled the trigger.

She did not slump forward, but sat rigidly upright, watching with dead eyes as Arielle, her gown bloodstained, rose to her feet in horror.

Arielle stood frozen until Mindy ran to her, burying her face in her skirts. Then she came to her senses. Ramon's troops would arrive any moment. They had to get out of here—

Putting Mindy from her, she pulled a velvet throw from a couch and covered Ramon's dead body. Then she looked at the others helplessly. Where could they go?

At that moment, Coaley burst in, blind, in his excitement, to the tragedy surrounding him. Soldiers were coming. Through the cane fields.

"The tree-cave," Mindy said suddenly.

"Go," Arielle said, harshly. "Run!"

Mindy and Coaley scampered out, hand in hand. Lindenwood followed with a fainting Luisa. Arielle paused for a moment to look back.

Blanche and Bathilde had fled. Madam Villeré sat stiffly in her chair, a queenly figure even in death.

Her son lay, subserviently, at her feet.

"I'm sorry, Ramon." Arielle's face twisted in grief. "Oh God, I'm sorry!"

Then she, too, ran.

They all reached the tree-cave and waited, huddled in silence. It was as if, by not mentioning the tragedies, they'd never happened. Arielle

rubbed Luisa's cold hands. The girl was in deep shock.

"She's ill," she replied shortly to Coaley's questioning. Undaunted, he turned to Mindy, describing the flight of the slaves. "Even ole Teeny, she run lak a rabbit." Mindy remained quiet. Finally, Coaley grew tired of entertaining himself.

"Think Ah'll sneak out an' see if that ol' boat still tied undah the bridge," he said importantly. "Us might need it to 'scape this place."

"Coaley—"

Arielle snatched at his shirttail. "Coaley, come back herel"

But he was gone. It seemed like hours before he was back at the entrance, his whisper echoing in the cave. "Us got a boat. But somebody a-comin'. Gonna find out who—"

"Coaley! No!" Arielle scrambled to the entrance. She heard the sound of hooves. They were coming toward the plantation from the front. Coaley's voice sounded from the bridge. "It Massa Ramon, a-comin' with sogers. I tells him wheahat we is—"

"It's not Ramon," she screamed. "Coaley, it's not—"

The bridge thundered with a sound of galloping as the wave of mounted men swept over it and past. Arielle began to shiver with apprehension. "Keep Mindy here," she said in a tight voice.

She crawled on through the opening. "Coaley?"

There was no answer. On the earth at the beginning of the bridge lay what appeared to be a bundle of rags. Arielle made her way to it, moving from shadow to shadow.

The moon shone full on the little boy's dead face. His eyes were open as if in expectation. His

lips were parted in the smile with which he had rushed to meet his master. His features were untouched, the rest of his body mangled by the hooves that had passed over him.

Arielle shuddered. There were sounds of shooting from the house. The din of battle had erupted, mingled with hoarse yelling. Who was killing whom? It made little difference. Coaley was the first casualty of this particular battle.

She stepped out of her petticoat, wrapped it around the shattered body and, lifting the blood-stained bundle, made her way back to the cave beneath the tree.

Mindy had lit a candle, shielding it with a shell. She looked at the thing in Arielle's arms and began to scream.

Thaddeus Lindenwood clamped a bony hand over her mouth. "Don't, little sweetheart! They will find us! Coaley wouldn't want that, would he? Look, Arielle is fixing a nice place for him to sleep. He'll like it there."

Arielle removed Mindy's doll. The natural cradle formed by the tree's roots was long enough for what was left of Coaley. She used the comforter she'd made for their playhouse that first Christmas to pillow the small woolly head. Lindenwood donated his cape. Arielle spread it with the red lining out and closed Coaley's eyes.

Coaley slept.

Mindy had gone silent and rigid in Lindenwood's arms. He rubbed her hands, trying to arouse some expression in the blank shocked eyes; he told several anecdotes from his stage experience that normally would have delighted the child. Finally, he said desperately, "Mindy, you always wanted to know my middle name. I think I'll tell you."

He lowered his voice and spoke with a furtive reluctance.

"It is *Darling*. The D stands for Darling."

Mindy turned her face to Lindenwood's chest and burst into tears. The old actor and Arielle exchanged glances over Mindy's curls. She would be all right.

At the darkest hour of the night, the small group made its way to the boat beneath the bridge. The firing had stopped at the house, and there were scenes of activity around a bonfire in the yard. A heavy smell of cordite hung in the air.

Arielle went first, supporting the numb Luisa. Lindenwood followed, stopping to wait for Mindy, the last to leave the cave. She had paused to look down at Coaley once more, her eyes wet with tears.

"Goodnight, husbin'," she said formally. "Sleep well."

It was a dumb thing to say. A child's game, begun when she was eight. Now, she was ten, going on eleven. But she thought maybe Coaley would like it.

She blew out the candle and set it carefully on the floor where Coaley could reach it if he needed it. Then she wriggled through the entrance and put her hand in Lindenwood's.

*Thaddeus Darling Lindenwood*. It suited him.

## Chapter 14

The small boat laden with its shocked and grief-stricken occupants moved out as a heavy fog began to settle over the waters. Arielle handled the heavy pole, moving the pirogue through the shallows. After her long walk from Beká, she had reached the end of endurance. Her body was reeling with fatigue. She kept the happenings of the night carefully blanked from her mind. She was responsible for the safety of all of them: a sick girl, an old man, and a child.

Somehow she must get them to New Orleans. But, floating in a sea of mist, it was too easy to take a wrong turn. If she lost her sense of direction, they would all die, deep in the swamp.

Finally, far from the house that had become a battleground, she grounded the pirogue on a mudbar. Here, they would wait until the morning.

Arielle sat down, wearily, her clothing soaked through, her feet wet from the water in the bottom of the boat. She began to shiver, and Mindy crept to her side, cuddling close against her. Arielle clung to her, grateful for the little girl's comforting warmth.

"I will help with the boat," Mindy offered. "I know how. Coaley taught me."

Then both sisters were crying, wordlessly holding to each other, shaken with sobs.

"I'm sorry, Arie," Mindy said finally. "I s'pose you loved him a lot."

"More than I knew," Arielle said. In her mind, she could see a tall young man, dark hair tumbling over his forehead, exquisitely dressed in a tawny velvet coat over fawn breeches, a walking stick in his hand—

Then there was the boy who faced his mother, his womanish mouth trembling as he announced their marriage; the impotent husband who had asked for, and received, her friendship. Then the gentle, tender lover—

And finally the man who shivered in her arms, saying, *I seem to have betrayed everyone I've ever loved. . . . The mark of Cain—*

Her last vision of him, in a posture of obeisance at his dead mother's feet, she shut from her mind.

There was no more time for crying. She must think of the others. Luisa had suffered a double loss. And Mindy's beloved Coaley was dead. Poor Lindenwood, without his cape, was racked with chills as he tried to keep Luisa warm. She prayed for the morning to come. Whatever else it brought, there would be the sun.

The day dawned slowly, the fog lifting. Lindenwood cursed himself for not having brought his flint. There would be no means of making a fire.



They had no food, no water except the scummy waters of the brackish waterways, which they didn't dare to drink.

Arielle rose and began to pole the boat from the mudbank. She hadn't realized her hands had blistered so badly the night before. She was not too certain of her direction as she moved from one waterway into another. But surely, by trying always to veer to the right, she would be able to find the roadway. Then they could walk—

Within several hours, she caught a glimpse of the road through tangled vegetation. She put her hand to her mouth to suppress a sob of disappointment. A troop of marching men stretched along its length: men in ragged homespun, a few in pirate's garb.

Not knowing if they were friend or foe, the small group in the pirogue sat quietly, fearing to breathe, as Arielle reversed their course, pushing farther back into the swamp.

The bayous wound interminably, seeming to curve always in the wrong direction. Occasionally they found themselves in a still backwater and had to retrace their route. Arielle began to weaken, the muscles in her arms trembling visibly. Mindy, too, was exhausted. Then Luisa stood, her eyes sane now, her mouth firm.

"It is my turn." She took the pole, and Lindenwood moved to help her. Arielle and Mindy collapsed gratefully, and slept.

Four days of traveling through the swamp country. Four days of being wet, cold, weak with hunger. They had thought they were hopelessly lost—when they caught a glimpse of the road again.

They would walk. Death could overtake them no sooner on the road than in the swamp.

They had gone several limping miles, when a sound made them shrink toward the side of the road. A rattling munitions wagon hove into view. It was empty, heading back toward New Orleans. The driver drew up at the sight of the exhausted party. Ladies—afoot out here? What the hell—

He listened to their story, passed a canteen of fresh water—then, with a burst of generosity, a bottle of rum. He loaded the others into the rear of his vehicle, but Arielle took the seat beside him. She was worn out, a bit giddy from the effects of raw rum on an empty stomach, but she had to know what was happening.

The driver, a garrulous sharecropper in peacetime, was happy to oblige. Young Major Gabriel Villeré had gone straight to Jackson. His news had brought immediate action. The *Carolina*, under Commodore Patterson, had sailed in close to the Villeré plantation and opened fire.

“Cap’n Henley, ship’s master, he yells, ‘Now, boys, give it to ’em for the honor of America!’ And they done it! When they fired that broadside, Jackson’s men come tearin’ out of the weeds to every side.”

He went on, describing the battle in detail. The American Seventh Regiment hit the enemy’s outpost on the high road near the river. Colonel de la Ronde guided General Coffee and six hundred men against the British right flank. Major D’Aquín hit the left with his troops of Negroes and loyal Choctaws. The Tennesseans came up from the orange groves on the de la Ronde plantation. And Dominique You, Beluchi, and their artillery opened fire from the levee.

“Dominique You? Beluchi? I can’t believe—”

“Hell yes! Didn’t you know? Laffite threw in

with us. Would have all along, if it wasn't for that damn Claiborne—s'cuse the language, Ma'am."

Laffite was not a traitor. Then Andre was not. Only Ramon. Arielle's head hurt. She would think about it later. For now she listened to the driver. Four hundred British had been killed in the skirmish. The Americans lost only twenty-four. Then a fog moved in, putting an end to what would have been a great victory.

Having delivered the good news, the man now delivered the bad. The British had landed troops at Chef Menteur. A battery had been erected at the Villeré plantation for the purpose of attacking the *Carolina*, now joined by the *Louisiana*. The *Carolina* had gone down in flames, the *Louisiana* was towed upriver and saved. It was said the British were planning to attack the Americans at the Rodriguez Canal.

"We can't lose, can we?"

"Hell no. We've only got a couple thousand men to their twelve thousand. But we've got Laffite's men, and old Andy's dirty-shirts. They ain't got a chance."

He spat a stream of tobacco over the side, and whipped up the horses. The home stretch was in sight.

The streets of New Orleans were vastly changed. They were jammed with munitions wagons, ambulances, and supply vehicles. Newly outfitted troops were filing toward their assigned destinations. Ragged country boys, come to offer their services, milled in confusion. Flags hung from every window, and everywhere there were women doing the work of men. They helped to pass out food and weapons. A church had been opened as a hospital,

and women went in and out, carrying pails and basins.

The driver stopped near a food-laden table on the banquette, and introduced his passengers as refugees. Soon they had mugs of steaming coffee, and bowls of rich gumbo.

"Eat slowly," Arielle cautioned the others. "Or you will be sick."

Refreshed, they began to think of where they would go next. They had no money, no food, no clothing.

"But we have a house," Luisa said excitedly. "My house! Mine and Louis's."

They followed her through the streets. Her fast pace turned into a run as they neared the small house where she'd been torn from her husband's arms. At the front door, she paused. The splintered door had been replaced on its hinges. It dawned on her that someone might be living there—

"It is my house," she said, angrily. She turned the knob, and the door swung open.

She stood face to face with Louis Daumont. In full uniform, he had been in the process of drawing on his gloves.

"Luisa!"

The gloves dropped from his hands and she was in his arms, laughing and crying at the same time. "I tried to find you," he kept saying. "Oh God! When they released me, I tried to find you! But they were all dead—"

He caught sight of Arielle, standing behind his wife. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "My sympathies, Ma'am."

Arielle could hold in her grief no longer. At the sight of the young soldier, standing in uniform, she

burst into tears. Ramon was dead. And in death, he aroused more emotion in her than he ever did in life. She wept at the waste of him. And at her own tragic loss.

"Ariel" Mindy's hands were dragging at her arm. "Arie, don't cry like that! Please."

Behind her, Lindenwood's rich voice sounded, "*One fire burns out another burning,*" he said. "*One pain is lessened by another's anguish. Romeo and Juliet*, act one, scene two. Appropriate, don't you think?"

Arielle stared at him. He did not seem the same without his theatrical cape. He was oddly shrunken, his eyes dark with pain. He had loved Coaley as Mindy did. Perhaps he'd felt a fondness for Ramon, too.

She looked down at Mindy. The child was skin and bones, with an expression too old for a little girl to wear.

"This is a happy time," she whispered. "Let's go find a park to sit in, so that Luisa and her husband can spend some time alone."

When they returned, Louis had gone to join the defenders of the Rodriguez. Canel. Luisa was pale, her eyes swollen, but she had set about preparing beds and an evening meal. Arielle ached with sympathy as she watched the girl bustle about. She had lost her brother, her mother, and now her husband would be in the thick of the fighting.

"He will be safe," Arielle said. "Don't worry."

Luisa turned toward her, her oval face serene. "I am not worrying," she said gently. "I waited all my life for today. Now the day is over. If Louis doesn't come back, at least I made him happy."

Arielle felt a growing respect. She'd always thought Luisa was weak, disliked her sullen ways.

Now given the chance to be herself, the girl had blossomed into a strong, likable woman.

And she could understand her way of thinking. She herself had felt like that, long ago, saying good-bye to the man she loved in the garden at Villeré-in-the-Swamp. She'd thought those idyllic nights in André's arms would sustain her forever. But they had not been enough for him.

"Don't look so sad, Arielle. I know it hurts losing Ramon, in spite of what he did—but, you made him happy, too."

Arielle flushed. She had not been thinking of Ramon. His words on that last night flashed into her mind. *Damn it! Just this once, couldn't you respond?*

She had tried. Dear God, she'd tried. And it hadn't been enough.

Then he had said, *I love you. Remember that, if I don't come back.*

He must have had a premonition. He had come to her, seeking solace, assurance that he was alive, loved, needed. He'd come close to sharing his thoughts with her that night. If she'd probed a little, he might have told her of his plans. She could possibly have reasoned with him, counteracted his mother's influence.

Instead, she had suffered his caresses through wifely duty, her heart still faithful to another man. She had failed him.

Like Luisa, she had a time with her husband to remember. Dear God, if she could only forget!

## Chapter 15

The next morning they awoke to the sound of British artillery and the answering thunder of Jackson's forces. The attack upon the Americans at the Rodriguez Canal had begun.

Arielle found Luisa already up. Coffee and croissants awaited them. Luisa had donned a white apron. She intended to go to the church and offer her services. There would be wounded coming in. Again, Arielle felt a deep admiration for the girl. She, too, would go.

Before the day was ended, they all had found work to do. Thaddeus and Mindy volunteered to help at the hot-food stands set up throughout the city for refugees and stragglers come in to join with Jackson's army. They had more work to do than Arielle and Luisa. The wounded coming in were few. Although Jackson's forces had only five pieces

of battery, Dominique You and Beluchi directed a terrible return fire and the *Louisiana*, letting the British advance within range, let loose a cannonade that broke up the enemy columns. They had retreated, losing nearly three hundred men. Jackson had lost seven.

The few wounded who straggled in were boastful. It had been an overwhelming victory. Arielle worked with deft fingers, bandaging wounds after the doctors had removed bullets; carrying water to those who were feverish; seeing that their loved ones were notified. Rushing to a makeshift operating table at a doctor's call, she stopped short, dropping the basin she held. The man on the table was scar-faced and noseless. Nez Coupé.

"Is he hurt badly?" she whispered, her throat tight.

The patient answered for himself. "Hell no," he growled. "Get this over with so I can get back to the fighting." He turned his head, his eyes widening. "Well, I'll be damned!" His voice changed, taking on a mock-pitiful note. "Go ahead, Doc. I guess I can stand it, if this pretty lady here will hold my hand."

The bullet was extracted, and Nez Coupé, white-faced, was taken, protesting, to a cot. He would have to remain under supervision for several days. Despite his injury, he seemed to bring new life to the people around him. Arielle, busy at her work, saw him across the room, gesticulating with his good hand, keeping an audience of wounded men enthralled. Probably telling highly embroidered stories of his adventures, Arielle thought with amusement.

She didn't realize she was the topic of conversation until Luisa came to her after changing Nez Coupé's dressing. Her eyes were sparkling with a



look of surprised delight. "Arielle, you didn't! I can't believe it!"

Nez Coupé had told the story of how she'd kneed Gambi, then attacked him with his own knife.

Arielle covered her face with her hands. No wonder the patients had been looking at her so strangely. "I can't face them again," she said.

"Of course you can. Arielle—I'm proud of you!" Luisa glowed with admiration. "He deserved it! But, Arielle—do you think you could actually *kill* a man?"

Arielle flinched. The memory of Hawkins coming at her, roaring, blood-spattered, his gory hands about her throat, was still too clear. Did she kill him? Or did he die at the hands of Big George. She didn't know. But she had *tried*. That was as bad as the deed.

"I don't know," she said, dully. "I just don't know."

For a time, her life was made miserable. Her patients teased her constantly about her prowess with a knife. Solemnly, they admonished newcomers being readied for surgery to "watch out for Nurse Marquez."

The good-natured teasing let up as wounded men returned to their posts and others took their places. There were no major engagements for several days. Most of the casualties resulted from hand-to-hand fighting in small skirmishes. The majority of them were English. The Tennesseans, called "dirty shirts" by the English, crept through ditches and tall grass to pick off British sentries and small groups of English soldiers. They referred to these forays as "hunting parties." The red coats of the enemy made fine targets.

"They say we don't fight fair," one lanky indi-

vidual snickered as Arielle dressed a saber wound. "Hell, they line up like a bunch of dressed dummies and walk toward us asking fer it. It's our country. We didn't ask 'em to come over and git shot up!"

The British soldiers, wounded and brought in as prisoners, were grave and quiet. Arielle could not help liking them. She hated war!

On the first morning of the new year, there was a major engagement. Jackson had received word the previous night that the British were building batteries along a ditch at Chalmette Plantation. He came out of his headquarters to find the fog that had kept them from taking action earlier had lifted. The British battery was only six hundred yards away.

Jackson was forced to retreat. He knew the British had twenty-eight cannon, the Americans only ten. He turned to other means. The sharpshooters were sent out on their "hunting parties;" the Tennesseans with their rifles; the Baratarians with whatever weapons were available to them. It was no contest. By nightfall the engagement had ended, the British huddling behind their own lines, confused by this unorthodox method of making war.

On January 5th, a number of prisoners were captured by Pierre Laffite and a group of his Baratarians. Those who were unharmed were taken to the Cabildo for questioning. Others were borne on stretchers to the makeshift hospital where Arielle was working. The doctors, overworked, went over them in a swift preliminary examination of their wounds. This one should go straight to the table. This one could wait. This one—no need, he was dying. Set him out of the way.

Coming in with a packet of lint and bandages prepared by the women of New Orleans, Arielle stopped with a small cry. On a stretcher against the

wall, lay the figure of a man. A rough sheet covered him, drawn up over his face. She could only see a tumble of dark hair over a high forehead, dark brows.

"Andre!" Her lips formed his name.

She put the packet down, her hands like ice, and went to the stretcher, pulling back the sheet with trembling fingers. The man was young, with a soft mouth and a round babyish chin. He wore a red coat. It was stained with a darker red.

"Thank God!" she whispered. Then she hated herself for saying it. Andre Villeré was nothing to her. Someone, somewhere, loved this man, and would suffer! Flushed with shame, she started to replace the sheet, then saw the closed eyes quiver. He wasn't dead!

She went frantically for a doctor. They were all occupied, and she burst into tears. Finally, Doctor Brown, an elderly man, shook her. "The man's dying," he said. "We've got to work on the ones who have a chance!"

Arielle returned to the Britisher's side. At least she could make him comfortable.

She cut away the bloodstained coat and shirt, shuddering at the horrible gaping wound in his chest. She made a compress to slow the bleeding that continued to spread like a crimson sunburst, then covered him against a chill. Bringing a cup of water, she tried to force some through his unresponsive lips, then settled for sponging his face. She jumped when he suddenly spoke.

"Mary?"

"Just sleep," she whispered. "Just sleep."

He continued talking, rambling for an hour before he died. And sorting among the chaff of his mumbled words, Arielle learned that the English

were digging out Canal Villeré, which ran from General Villeré's plantation to the river. They planned to use the channel for the passage of their boats. It would be the big push of the war. Then he could go home. He could go home. He could go home—

His hand twitched beneath the sheet. "Mary," he said again. "Mary!" Arielle put her hand over his in an attempt to ease him. He smiled—and at last he slept.

Arielle rose from her cramped position. She was emotionally exhausted, stiff from kneeling, and the front of her apron was covered with the dead Englishman's blood. But she must get this information to Claiborne.

He might not believe her, she thought as she hurried to the Cabildo. She had only seen him once since she arrived in the city. He'd been distant, merely inclining his head to her greeting, his eyes filled with suspicion.

No wonder, she thought wearily. She knew now, that Ramon's vendetta with Laffite had been for the purpose of alienating him from the Americans, forcing him to the English side. And she had done her bit with the tales she'd carried to the governor. She couldn't blame him.

She was nervous as she was ushered into his office. Even more so when she saw that the man in conversation with him was Jean Laffite.

His eyes lit up at sight of her, and a small pleased smile touched his lips. She steeled herself and faced Claiborne, delivering her message, seeing the expression of doubt on the man's face.

Claiborne had reason to doubt. Rumors and lies had been spread among the troops in an effort to waste the Americans' strength. Only three days ago,

Jackson heard that a division of British planned an attack on his rear flank. They were supposed to be landing from boats at Bayou Bienvenu and the Pier-nas Canal. Two hundred men had followed General Coffee, knee-deep in mud, to repel the attackers. The report had been false.

"You are sure this man wasn't lying?"

"I am sure he was *dying*," Arielle said indignantly. "He was in no condition to even know what he was saying!"

Jean Laffite draped a comradely arm about Claiborne's shoulders. "Relax," he said. "We obtained that very information from one of our prisoners, and here's your proof. I would alert Jackson at once."

"But this girl—her husband—"

"I would stake my life on the integrity of Madam Marquez," Laffite said softly. "And I must say, I would far rather have her working *for* us than against us. I think you should offer her a commission in your army."

His smile at her was a winning one, and Arielle found herself succumbing to his charm.

"I have delivered my information," she said stiffly. "Now, if you will excuse me—"

His laughter followed her as she fled.

At dawn on January 8th, Arielle stepped from the makeshift hospital to get a breath of fresh air. There were no new patients, just those who were slowly dying from suppurating wounds. The hospital had taken on a smell of putrefaction and decay that made the outdoor scent of fish and river mud smell like perfume. Arielle lifted her face to the sky, breathing in deeply. And she saw a bright flash.

A British Congreve rocket had been sent up. It was the signal for attack.

She was to hear the story later, from Creole, from Cajun, from long-jawed Tennessee riflemen. Their stories varied according to individual viewpoint, but the facts were essentially the same.

The British had advanced, sixty abreast, uniforms glittering in the morning light. The battery commanded by Garrieus Flaageac exploded with cannon. The English went down like ninepins before the blast, other redcoats moving in to take the places of the fallen. The Tennesseans and Baratarians blasted them with rifle shot. And still they came on, the field of battle littered with the dying and the dead.

The Americans fought behind earthwork barricades, reinforced by bales of cotton. The bales were set afire, creating a temporary diversion, and an English column attempted to move in. Their own dead halted them. The column wavered, broke, and ran. British officers struck out at their men with the flat of their swords in an attempt to halt the rout. General Sir Edward Pakenham, in trying to rally his forces, was mortally wounded.

Following the siege, General Jackson was said to have remarked, "If I were ordered to storm the gates of Hell, with Captain Dominique You as my lieutenant, I would have no misgivings of the result."

The story went the rounds of New Orleans. It was told in the streets, in brothels, and alehouses. New Orleans took pride in its own.

The fighting had lasted only one hour. Thirteen Americans had been killed or wounded. The British lost two thousand six hundred. Pakenham, brother-in-law of Wellington, who had been promised an earl's title when Louisiana was in English hands, was dead.

The American victory was not without its dark side. While the battle was taking place, Americans stationed across the river from Chalmette were attacked by the British. They had crossed the river in boats brought through the Canal Villeré. The Americans, most of them Kentuckians, poorly armed and outnumbered, were forced to retreat. By the evening of the 8th, wounded from both sides poured into the city of New Orleans.

Arielle, rubbing her aching back and closing her tired eyes, wondered if it would ever end.

On January 9th, Fort St. Phillip was attacked by five British ships that pounded at its fortifications for eight days, with four sea-mortars. There was still sporadic firing at Chalmette and fighting in Barataria where Jean Laffite held off British troops at The Temple. The *chênière* was a natural fort, and the English were unable to breach its defenses. Commodore Patterson led six ships through Lake Borgne, capturing three British transports.

On January 18th, the English asked for an exchange of prisoners. That night, the Americans blasted the British lines with heavy mortars. There was no answering fire. Troubled, fearing a surprise attack, Jackson waited.

On the morning of the 19th, telescopes turned toward the enemy encampment showed nothing unusual. The British flag still flew above the lines. Sentries stood stiffly at their posts.

Nothing moved.

When they arrived in the British camp, the Americans were stunned. The sentries were nothing more than soldier's uniforms that had been stuffed with marsh grass! The only British soldiers who remained alive were too wounded to be moved.

The battle for New Orleans had ended.

On January 23rd, the troops came home in triumph. They marched to the *Marseillaise*, and to "Yankee Doodle." Flags waved from every house, every shop. People stood on rooftops, cheering. The heroes of the day were Andrew Jackson, the Laffites, Dominique You, and Beluchi.

Luisa gave a little shriek at the sight of Louis Daumont, alive and unharmed. She rushed toward him, and he swung her up on his horse to ride with him.

Arielle felt utterly lost and lonely. If Ramon's plans had been accomplished, the Baratarians, Jackson's "dirty shirts," the Guard of New Orleans, would have been replaced by long lines of British soldiers in red coats. This was not her victory, not her triumph.

There were still wounded to care for. Her work would be doubled without Luisa's aid. She turned back to the hospital after one last glance at the passing parade. A fear that she refused to acknowledge lay heavy in her chest.

She had seen no sign of Andre Villeré. He might be listed among the dead.



## Chapter 16

The days that followed were turmoil as New Orleans got back to the business of living. The women of the city, who had turned out to aid the wounded, lost interest. Their men were home. Bandaging a gallant hero in time of war was one thing. Nursing long-term invalids with gangrenous wounds was quite another. For a time, Arielle worked almost alone, smoothing covers, laving fevered brows, murmuring words of comfort.

Then others came. A woman who had lost her son. Two widows whose husbands had been killed in battle. A girl who had lost the man she was going to marry. A pretty quadroon, former mistress of a dead officer. They wanted to help.

Arielle watched them moving from bed to bed, touching the sick men in an agony of love. She knew they saw, in each, the person of their lost ones. This

might have been John, Henri, Carlos— Their vigil here was an act that bound them to their departed.

The patients were in good hands. Now, she could go.

That afternoon, she went to Ramon's factor. There was little money. This year's sugaring-off had been interrupted by the coming of the British. The funds from the previous crop had dwindled. Arielle took what little he could give her.

The next morning she left the house at dawn—as if she were returning to care for her patients. She didn't want Mindy, Luisa, or Lindenwood to know where she was going. They would try to argue her out of it. It was dangerous, they would say. The swamps were still filled with strays, the scavengers that prey on the dead—

Worse, they might insist on going with her. And there might be sights too terrible to see. Enured by her work with the wounded, she wasn't sure of her own ability to face the situation.

She thrust a kitchen knife into her waistband, donned a cloak, and hurried through the thick fog to a stable, where she'd already made arrangements to hire a horse.

Then she set out for Villeré-in-the-Swamp.

The ride was long and lonely. She tried to keep her mind occupied with other things to shut out the thought of what might await her. She knew she must find another place to live. They could not stay with the Daumonts indefinitely. But where would they go? There was not enough money to buy or rent a house. Not enough to see the three of them, Mindy, Lindenwood, and herself, home to New York. No way to support them when they got there—

She was left with two choices. They might occupy the house of Henri Lanier until he returned—after all, they were relatives in a way. Or they could return to Villeré-in-the-Swamp. That seemed the most logical course. It depended on what horrors she found there today.

The horse found its way through the fog, keeping to the road by instinct. Then the fog began to lift, tendrils curling upward around the animal's legs, as if trying to trap him in its white, cottony web. Soon, at the sides of the road, there was an occasional gleam of water. Then cypress trees loomed through the crawling mist, twisted monsters in a hushed world.

The glint of red among the swamp grasses shone like a beacon. Arielle pulled her horse to a halt, instinctively knowing what it was. Heart pounding, everything within her urged her to go on, to ignore the thing. But she couldn't. Not as long as there was a chance it might be alive.

She dismounted and went timorously toward the object that lay almost hidden in the grass. It was an English officer who lay face down. She touched the scarlet clad shoulder gently. He didn't move. She tried to turn him.

He had no face.

"My God," she whispered. "Oh my God!" Rising from her knees, she ran blindly toward her mount, tears streaming as she urged him into a run. After a while, coming to her senses, she slowed his gait. She had no desire to hurry to a place where worse horrors might be waiting.

Old Teeny, sitting on the porch of her shack with her clay pipe, heard the hoofbeats of an approaching horse and nodded.

"Go fetch Big George," she said to a pickaninny playing in the hard-packed yard. "Git!"

The child took off at a dead run, and Teeny smiled to herself. For some days, she'd been sprinkling Draw Across Powder on the bridge. Last night she'd got herself a new blanket from the storehouse, sprinkled Aunt Sally Dream Powder on the bed and under it, and she dreamed of the young Missus. The powder was sure to make her dream come true. Miss Arielle was coming home.

Arielle reached the bridge and sat for a moment with her eyes closed. Beside the bridge was the tree where they had found shelter. Small Coaley lay sleeping now, in the cave beneath its roots. But what would she find at the house—

She opened her eyes. The house wasn't there.

Snapping the reins, she stirred the horse into motion, only to pause again, sick at the scene that confronted her. The house was gone, grass already creeping over the place where it had been. She slid from her mount, unable to believe her eyes. A building couldn't disappear into thin air—

"It all done buhn," a voice said behind her.

Arielle whirled to face Big George. He looked at her with steady eyes. "Nuthin' lef' 'cep'n a shell. Ol' Teeny say it a bad place. Babako move in. He bad loa. An' Papa Guede. We haul it all away, use it for swampfill."

Arielle looked beyond him, seeing for the first time that the slave quarters were intact. Smoke rose from a few chimneys. Old Teeny rocked placidly on her porch. Another column of smoke boiled from the direction of the sugar mill. Big George followed her gaze.

"Sugarin' most done. Us late this year."

Arielle wiped at her tears without shame, then looked back toward the house. "I came to—to bury my husband," she said. "It hurts to think there's nothing left—"

George bent his head and shuffled guiltily. "He done berried, Missie."

Little by little, she got the story out of him. The slaves returned, after the battle, to find the house half-burned. The room in which Ramon lay at his mother's feet was still intact. They had removed Ramon and the unknown man, but had feared to touch the old woman.

"She jes' set there, lak a evil sperrit," George said, the horror of it still in his face. On Teeny's advice, they had burned the place and her body with it.

They had placed Ramon's body in his vault. And there was already something in it. "A woman, and a little bitty baby. Jes' put him alongside. Hope we done right—"

Cleone! Ramon was with Cleone and his child. He was with the girl he truly loved, and she, Arielle, was free—

"It was right," she said.

The black man looked relieved. "Massa Andre say it was whut us betta do—"

The name jolted through her. "Andre helped you? He's been here?" Her heart was singing. He was alive!

"Yassum. Wasn't fo' him, we wouldn't of found Coaley. Come look whut he done."

He led her down the bank of the bayou, reaching a hand to aid her. The entrance to the tree-cave had been filled in with a small arched door. Of heavy timber, it was strapped with metal. There was a latch, though it wasn't made to open. Painted a

soft blue, it looked like the entrance to some small elfland creature's home. A winding path of crushed shell ran to the doorway, bordered by larger shells. At either side, a flowering vine was planted.

"George, it's beautiful. Thank you," She tasted tears.

He stepped back in alarm. "Ol' George didn' do nuthin'. That Massa Andre's wuk. An' he done chink up all the holes. Ain' nuthin' can git at the chile."

"I'll have to thank him."

That would be no problem, George told her. Andre Villeré was at home, in his house on the next property. He'd asked that, when she showed up, she be told he wanted to see her.

As Arielle rode toward the small house hidden beyond the plantation, she tried to suppress the excitement mounting within her. Andre Villeré was no longer an enemy, someone to be reckoned with. Now, for the first time, she would face him as an ally.

Not that it made any difference, she thought forlornly. She must not forget that he now belonged to Tauna. And for him, she was the widow of the man he hated. She owed him an apology for her actions, and she must thank him for burying her dead. Then she would go.

She crossed the bridge and turned into a lane bordered by vegetation in trembling new leaf. Her heart stopped, then speeded up at the sight of the fairy-tale house, its tiles mellow in the sun. As she slipped from her horse, she heard a sound of digging in the garden. On impulse, she entered the blue door that always stood ajar.

Andre Villeré sensed her presence and turned from his work. He wore dark trousers and a faded blue shirt that opened to reveal his brown chest. A

lock of black hair tumbled over his forehead, and his eyes, that could grow so dark with emotion, caught fire from the sun, and shone with golden lights.

"Arielle!"

He came toward her. She fought against the current of magnetism that sparked between them, pulling her to meet him. Dear God, she thought, drawing a shuddering breath. Dear God! With an effort she stiffened her shoulders and forced a semblance of calm into her voice.

"I came to tell you, I appreciate your recent kindness, and to offer my apologies. I was convinced you and Laffite were working with the British. But, instead—" She faltered, her words stumbling.

"Don't blame Ramon too much," he said unexpectedly. "He was his mother's tool."

"He saved my life."

"I know." Blanche had related to him every detail of what had happened on that dreadful night. The woman's mind had been touched, and she was not in full control of her senses, but she was able to give the full story. And Andre's heart had leaped at the hearing of it. Poor Arielle! She had not been with them in their plan to take over the area. And it had been her warning that had saved the day—

She smiled now, tiredly. "Well, I have delivered my thanks and apologized. I had better go. It's a long ride—"

"Arielle!" He put his hand on her arm. She felt the touch of it like fire in her veins and pulled hastily away, avoiding his unhappy eyes. "Arielle, come into the house. I want to talk to you. Oh, you don't have to worry. Cinnie's here. You will be properly chaperoned."

She walked ahead of him into the shadowed

room. Cinnie greeted her with a delighted grin and went to prepare tea. Arielle sat down, her face cold and composed but her mind racing wildly. *Oh, please God, don't let him touch me. Help me get through this ordeal without letting him know how I feel.*

He walked to the window and then turned to face her. "I spoke to your factor. He tells me there are financial problems. I would like to ask what your plans are for the immediate future."

His voice was terse, businesslike, like a dash of cold water. "I checked on the value of the property," he said. "I would like to purchase it from you."

She sat in shock, the picture becoming finally clear. He had not wished to see her for herself, but because she was Ramon's widow. He'd resented Ramon because he claimed his inheritance. Now he was trying to get his hands on the property—and Ramon hardly cold in his grave—

"You can set your own price. This year's sugar crop won't rebuild the house, you know. You must have something to live on."

"What do you plan to do with the property?" she asked stiffly.

"Add it to mine, and become a planter. Now that things have settled, I want to settle down, raise a family."

"Of course," she said, "Of course." She looked around the room with bleak eyes, seeing Tauna as the mistress here. She got to her feet. "I will have the papers drawn, and name a figure. You will find me at the Lanier house. I would suggest Tuesday of next week."

She stormed out of the house, slamming the front door behind her. Cinnie, entering from the



kitchen, almost dropped her tray. "What got into the Missie?" she wanted to know.

Andre was white. "I don't have the slightest idea, Cinnie. I wish to hell I did."

He was not alone in his wish. Arielle was equally confused. She'd had no reason to judge him. All he'd wanted was to make her a business proposition. A proposition that would bring her the money she needed so badly. What had she wanted from the man?

A sob caught in her throat as she admitted her needs to herself. She'd wanted him to take her in his arms, to hold her and kiss away the distance that lay between them. She'd wanted him to swear there was nothing between him and Tauna. She'd wanted him to have made plans for her future—a future that included him.

She would sell him the property and divide the money with Luisa; poor, forgotten Luisa. Then, when it was safe to travel, she would return to New York, to people who loved her.

Passing the overseer's house, she caught sight of Trill, puttering in the yard. The girl was pregnant. Arielle felt a dull ache of envy. She rode on to the cemetery, pausing at the vault where Ramon lay with Cleone and his child. She was an intruder here, but it seemed fitting to say goodbye.

Returning to the bridge, she dismounted and made her way down to the walk of shining pearl leading to the small blue door at the base of the tree. She stood there for a long time, her head against the rough bark. And finally, on a whim, she knocked three times, gently. Did Coaley hear? Did he know that she was there? Through blind eyes, she visualized his small black face, lips parted in a welcoming smile.

There was no answer to her knocking. There never would be. Arielle climbed back up the bank and mounted once more. It was growing late, and she must get home to Mindy.

## Chapter 17

The move to the Lanier home was effected with little difficulty. There were no possessions to be transported. She and Mindy took the room they'd occupied before. On the first night while Mindy was sleeping, Arielle went down to Henri Lanier's study, searching through his papers until she found a bill of sale.

She copied its terminology, altering its wording to suit her needs. It looked quite imposing. So did the price she had set on the property. She studied it for a while, then lowered the figure, putting in another clause. Those slaves who wished to go were to be set free. The others were to be cared for.

The next morning, she broke the news to Mindy and Lindenwood. She had a buyer for Villeré-in-the-Swamp. They were going home to New York.

Neither took the news as she had expected. Mindy, grown into a grave, long-legged silent child, burst into tears and ran from the room. Thaddeus Lindenwood eyed Arielle keenly.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"Quite sure. And we have no other choice. The sugar crop won't bring in enough to rebuild and support the plantation until we harvest another. We are living, uninvited, in my stepfather's house. He will probably return soon—"

He still looked at her with steady eyes, and she threw up her hands. "What would you have me do?" she asked defensively.

"What you want to do, Arielle. And I don't think you want to do this. It is a good place for a child to grow up."

Perhaps it would be now, Arielle thought. Now that Madam Villeré was gone. But there would always be memories to haunt her and Mindy. And she could not live there, knowing that Andre was near—beyond the property, across a wooden bridge, in a fairy-tale house with a garden of flowers—

"The decision has been made. I would like you and Mindy both to be present when the buyer comes. I would like you to witness our signatures."

Lindenwood shrugged. There was nothing more to say.

On Tuesday afternoon, they waited for Andre Villeré. Arielle had rummaged through gowns. Cora left behind, selecting a dress of dark blue. It had an understated elegance, unlike many of the flamboyant articles in the woman's wardrobe. Its only trim was a ruche of white at the throat. Arielle could not imagine Cora wearing it. She would clean it and return it to its place, or leave a note with payment.

She donned it, and studied herself critically. The gown suited the image she wished to present. A dignified young matron.

Andre Villeré was taken aback at the business-like woman who greeted him at the door. As he followed her to the study, his lips twitched with amusement. The demure gown did not alter the effect of the hot blue eyes that shone above it. Nor did it hide the curves of the body he remembered so well. He thought of the girl he'd kissed in her wedding gown; the bruised girl he'd rescued from the snake; the harlot, parading at Laffite's home—his island lover, trying to maintain her dignity in her ragged undergarments—until she came willingly into his arms.

She would come again, God help him! In the meantime, he would purchase the plantation. He was buying time. Time for the past to fade a little, so that he could woo her properly.

Mindy and Lindenwood waited in the study. Her guards, he realized. She had no intention of being alone with him.

Mindy broke the formal introductions. "I know you," she said with a glad cry. "You are the man who gave me the note."

Arielle silenced her with a look and spread her papers for Andre's perusal. His lips puckered in a silent whistle as he read, but he scrawled his signature on the bill of sale.

"I will give you half now, and half in one month. Will that be satisfactory? It will take me some time to raise the rest."

She assented. The papers were signed, witnessed, and she asked Mindy to escort him to the door. "I'm glad he's buying it since we have to sell," the child said wistfully. "I like him."

"Liking or disliking, it makes no difference." Arielle sounded cross. "Now come to the kitchen and help me fix some refreshments. Aunt Luisa and her husband will be coming this evening."

When her guests arrived, she placed half of the money André had given her before Luisa. "I can't take this," the girl said. "We don't need it, Louis and I. But Arielle, where did you get so much? Surely the sugar crop—"

"I sold the plantation."

Luisa stared at her blankly. "But you couldn't, Arielle. It isn't yours to sell."

Arielle went white. "I thought—I'm Ramon's widow. I don't understand!"

"My mother forced Papa to leave the property to her, in trust for Ramon. But he insisted on naming my half-brother as next in line."

"André? Dear God! And he doesn't know it? He wasn't informed?"

"Of course he knows, you silly goose! This money will have to be returned. Louis will help you straighten it out. Now—who is the buyer?"

"I will handle it," Arielle said numbly. "It will be all right, I'm sure. Now, Luisa—would you like some tea?"

The next morning, she rode to Villeré-in-the-Swamp, crossed the property and the small wooden bridge at the other side. In her reticule, she carried the payment André had given her. All of it.

The house was empty. Evidently André had anticipated that she would find him out and return the money. She began to burn with a slow anger.

What had been his purpose in perpetrating such a hoax? Maybe he suffered from guilt because of Ramon's death and was trying to buy off his conscience. Perhaps he thought he could pay for taking

her virginity. If that were the case, he put her in the category of a woman of the streets.

The money would be returned.

She wheeled her horse about and headed for home. On the way, she came to a decision. She would keep some of what he had given her, and use it to return to New York. There she would find work and repay him.

It was not as easy as she had thought. Due to the return of troops and supplies, passage to New York was not immediately available. Arielle chafed as the days dragged by.

Spring came early to New Orleans, as if to celebrate the coming of peace. The air was warm and mellow, scented with flowers that bloomed more profusely than ever before. The city became an exotic setting for romance. Lovers whispered on the streets as they walked hand in hand. The nights echoed with guitars and soft songs that ached with yearning. The beauty of it filled Arielle with a vague, hurting sensation. And finally, she received a message.

The *Clarion* would be sailing within two days. There would be passage for three.

Thank God, Arielle lied to herself, she would not be forced to see Andre Villeré again!

There would be shopping to do. She had worn two of Cora's gowns now. If she left them, she must find replacements. Thaddeus would need a cloak; Mindy, several pinafores. She would go to Jean Lafite's establishment.

Approaching the shop, she paused, remembering the girl who had refused to enter the place so long ago. Cora had insisted, calling on Gambi for help. And Ramon had come to her rescue. She closed her eyes, recalling how he looked: a tall

young man, hair tumbling over his forehead, exquisitely dressed. Even then, his eyes had been haunted and sad.

Now he was dead. And she had an ill-fated marriage behind her. She must think of the future.

She made herself go into the shop. It was dim, but the shelves glowed with Laffite's smuggled merchandise. As Arielle stood in indecision, a girl moved out from behind a counter and toward another customer.

*Tauna.*

Arielle left the store before the girl had a chance to see her. For a while she walked the streets in a daze. Then entering another store, she bought a bolt of cloth. Mindy's clothes could be stitched aboard ship. She found a cape for Thaddeus in a small shop. It was clearly that of a British officer, much of the trim removed, but it would do. For herself, she would leave money for Cora's gowns, as she'd planned in the first place. Laden with her purchases, she started home to the house of Henri Lanier.

She was unaware that, in her absence, she'd had a visitor. Andre Villeré had arrived at the Lanier house, the remainder of the money in a bag; a bouquet of flowers in one hand. He'd intended to take her by surprise, to establish himself as a suitor if he had to use force.

Instead, he found Mindy.

Mindy was not averse to talking, and she was honest to a fault. Arielle would not take all the money. Didn't he know the plantation belonged to him? She was going to take some, just a little bit, to get them back to New York. And she intended to pay him back. They would be leaving tomorrow.

Andre Villeré was shaken. He decided to do



some talking himself. "I love your sister," he said. "I intended to ask her to marry me. To make her listen, even if I had to carry her off."

Mindy looked at him, liking what she saw. His eyes were dark with hurt now, but she had an idea they could be merry. He had a nice face, a mouth that looked like it would be good for laughing and kissing. She wished she were older.

"Why don't you then?"

He looked at her blankly. "Carry her off, I mean," she said impatiently.

He began to laugh softly, and she joined in. Together they devised a plan.

The next morning, Arielle, Mindy, and Lindenwood went to the dock. They had little in the way of baggage, but it was picked up by a man muffled in a greatcoat. He motioned them to follow. Arielle kept pace with him, Mindy and Lindenwood lagging behind.

Arielle went down the wooden steps and lowered herself into the small boat that would ferry them to the ship. She looked back. The others had disappeared in the fog. "Hurry, Mindy—"

To her horror, the boat began to move out. She could hear Lindenwood shouting, his voice booming across the increasing distance, and Mindy trying to quiet him. "It's all right," the child's voice shrilled. "Wait! Let me tell you—"

Arielle didn't pause to hear any more. She scrambled toward the man at the oars. "What do you think you're doing," she asked angrily.

She stopped short. She was looking into the laughing eyes of Andre Villeré.

This could not be happening! It was a dream. The mists rising from the brown water swirled about Andre's face. The river, swollen with spring rains,

moved them relentlessly downstream as Andre held his course toward a channel at the opposite side.

"Take me back," Arielle whispered. "Mindy will be frantic!"

When he failed to answer, she threw herself at him in a struggle for possession of the oars. He thrust her back and she fell. "Damn you," she sputtered, sitting up, "Damn you! I'll jump—"

"Go ahead. But I won't go in after you, not this time. I've got all I can do fighting this current. Sit down and keep still!"

The boat spun in an eddy and fetched up against a sandbar. Arielle gripped the side, hearing Andre utter a muffled oath. Then the boat, free, swung downriver and he returned to the oars, struggling to maintain his course. He had no desire to be swept downstream with his precious cargo.

He reached the narrow passage that was gateway to the waterlanes, and sighed with relief, resting for a moment, on his oars. He had shed the greatcoat. A hint of sun penetrated through the mist, touching the droplets that settled on his dark hair, turning them into jewels. For a moment he was clearly visible; face drawn with his exertions, eyes shadows; his open shirt revealing his tanned throat and chest.

She remembered how a pulse beat there—

Arielle started guiltily at the thought. "You've managed the crossing," she lashed out at him. "You've proven you're a big strong man. Now suppose you explain where you're taking me, and why!"

"I don't intend to explain anything. If I did, you wouldn't listen. You seem set on taking whatever I say the wrong way. Let's just say I'm returning you to—the scene of a crime."

Grande Terrel! Dear God, he was taking her to

Grande Terre; Laffites' island that had been destroyed because of her interference. She'd thought it was over, but evidently she was not to go unpunished.

"May I remind you that I am your stepbrother's widow?"

"I need no reminding. It's constantly on my mind." His tone was bitter. With a shuddering sigh, he bent to the oars again.

"I won't stand for this! Claiborne—"

"Claiborne can't help you now. I would suggest you relax and keep quiet."

He tossed her the greatcoat. "Make a pillow of that, and sleep if you can. It will be a long journey."

Arielle closed her lips tightly. He'd told her to be still. She did not intend to speak to him again. She leaned back, her mind busy with questions. Why had he paid her for property that was his own? Why had he abducted her? Was Laffite back at Grande Terre? What did they intend to do with her? And Mindy—what was Mindy thinking now, back there with Lindenwood on the dock—

The fog lifted, mists spiraling upward. Andre stood, poling through a mass of water vegetation, seeming unreal in the hazy atmosphere. She could almost imagine time had turned back. They had escaped from Grande Terre, and he was taking her home. Tonight they would stop on some romantic island, and he would take her in his arms—

She drove the thought away, and it kept returning. The day brightened into a glorious morning. Birds flashed above lush swamp-growth. Small animals peered curiously from behind damp leaves.

Arielle maintained a stubborn silence, aching inside from the memory of that other time.

At noon he drew the boat onto a small bar of

shell and prepared coffee. She walked away from him, stretching her cramped legs. If only she could keep this distance between them. Then, maybe, she could control her thinking—and hate him, as she should.

Forced to return to the fire, she ate in silence. He made no attempt to touch her, or to speak. And then they were once more on their way.

Dusk was falling when they reached a small *chênière*. She had been there before. The recognition set her trembling inside. Andre built a fire, and began bringing Spanish moss to make a bed. Only one. Lips tight, she went for an armful. She would make her own, at a distance from the fire. If he thought—

“Arielle.”

His voice was infinitely tender as he took the moss from her arms. She stood helpless, unable to struggle or to run as he tilted her face toward his. The moon shone full on his features, striking a glint of gold in his dark eyes.

“Arielle!”

His mouth was on hers, warm and seeking, and she felt herself respond. His heart pounded against her own, and she raised one hand touching his throat, feeling the pulse beating there. For a moment, she tried, confusedly, to recall the things that stood between them. Ramon, so recently dead. Tauna. All her unanswered questions—

Then they were gone, fading into nothingness before the answering passion that bloomed through her like a fiery flower as he slid the gown from her shoulder, pressing his lips there—and lifted her, carrying her to the familiar bed.

There he lay beside her, raising himself on one elbow to look down into her face. With his other

hand, he traced the lines of her mouth, her throat, her breasts. The moon touched his bare shoulders, turning them to a gleaming tawny gold.

Now he would answer her questions, he told her. There was much to explain—

She didn't need the answers, not now. For the moment, this was enough; the two of them together as they'd been on that last long journey. Now there was only the sweet agony of love, the burning of desire.

She put her fingers to his lips. "Later," she whispered. "Later, Andre!" She arched against him, and felt his shuddering response. "It doesn't matter now—"

And it didn't. Even Tauna was forgotten as the world began to spin and the stars turned into fireflies against the curtain of the night.

## EPILOGUE

A few days later, a small caravan set out from New Orleans. The city glittered in the morning light, hucksters crying their wares in a myriad of tongues; smiling Cajuns, Creoles, French, Americans, and Negroes going about their business. It was as if the fear of war had never touched the enchanted environs.

Only Luisa wept as she stood with her Louis, but hers were tears of happiness.

Andre Villeré and Arielle occupied the first carriage, leading the way. Behind them, Mindy sat with Thaddeus Lindenwood, beside herself with delight. There had been another wedding. A real one. And she was going home.

"I'm glad you're staying with us," she told Lindenwood. "I was so scared you would go back to the stage."

"I am too old, my dear." He smiled down at her, tossing his cape back, dramatically. *"Full of wise saws and modern instances, And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloon."*

"Act two, scene seven: *As You Like It*," Mindy giggled.

In the carriage ahead, Andre and Arielle were absorbed in each other, lost in a dream. Mindy watched them, smiling. Ramon had been nice, but rather remote. He wasn't right for Arielle. She saw the way her sister reached to touch Andre's cheek; how he looked down at her and put his arm about her waist.

Mama would approve.

Arielle had cautioned her that nothing at Villeré-in-the-Swamp would seem the same. The house had burned to the ground. Mindy could only summon up a little sadness. The house was a distant memory; a part of the past. But she would always grieve for Coaley.

When they crossed the arched bridge, both carriages stopped. Mindy scrambled down the vine-tangled bank to the tree-cave. Arielle followed, but waited at a distance. She saw her sister's eyes widen at the path of shell leading to a child-sized blue door. Mindy stood before it for a long time. Then, as Arielle had done, she knocked gently.

After a while she turned and climbed the bank, her face sad but accepting.

They drove past the slave quarters. Old Teeny, rocking on the porch, nodded with satisfaction. She'd sacrificed a white pigeon to Erzulie, Mistress of Damballa, loa of love, on Arielle's behalf. She would tell her fellow slaves there soon would be a celebration.

Arielle waved at Trill, watching from her yard. The carriages paused only slightly at the burial ground where Ramon slept in his tomb with his true wife and child, and Madam Villeré's tomb was sealed on emptiness. They would leave the dead to their rest.

The slaves, hoeing in the cane fields, looked up as they passed, a murmur of supposition running through their ranks. It was Massa Andre come home, for true. An' the young missus was with him, her face purely shinin' with joy—

The vehicles reached the perimeter of Villeré-in-the-Swamp and crossed the arched bridge. They negotiated the narrow lane, rounded the curve, and the house lay before them—long and low, of pink tabby, roofed with tiles of deeper rose. A willow trailed lacy fingers over the garden wall. Clematis echoed the blue of the half-door in the archway.

Andre stepped down from the carriage and assisted Arielle to the ground. He held her for a long moment. Then, as if drawn by a force beyond themselves, they pushed open the blue door and disappeared into the garden.

Mindy, for some incomprehensible reason, felt tears spring to her eyes. To cover her emotions, she turned to the ancient actor at her side. Surely he had something to say that would fit the occasion.

As if divining her thoughts, he shook his head. "The immortal bard produced much of drama, truth and beauty, but I do not believe any of it adequate for a time such as this. We shall let them make their own poetry."

He climbed creakily from the carriage and extended a gallant hand. "Come, my dear."

Together, they entered the fairy-tale house that would be home.



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**SHE WAS A  
TENDER YOUNG BLOSSOM  
IN A PARADISE STEAMING  
WITH TREACHERY  
AND SHAME**

Arielle had been touched by tragedy—now she must adjust to a new life in a strange new land. By the misty, jungle-strewn bayous near New Orleans, on a plantation riddled with violent passions and intrigue, she must become the wife of a man she has met but once, a man with a secret that will keep them wed in name alone, a man hopelessly tied to his mother, the iron-willed Madame Villere.

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**SILK AND  
SHADOW**

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